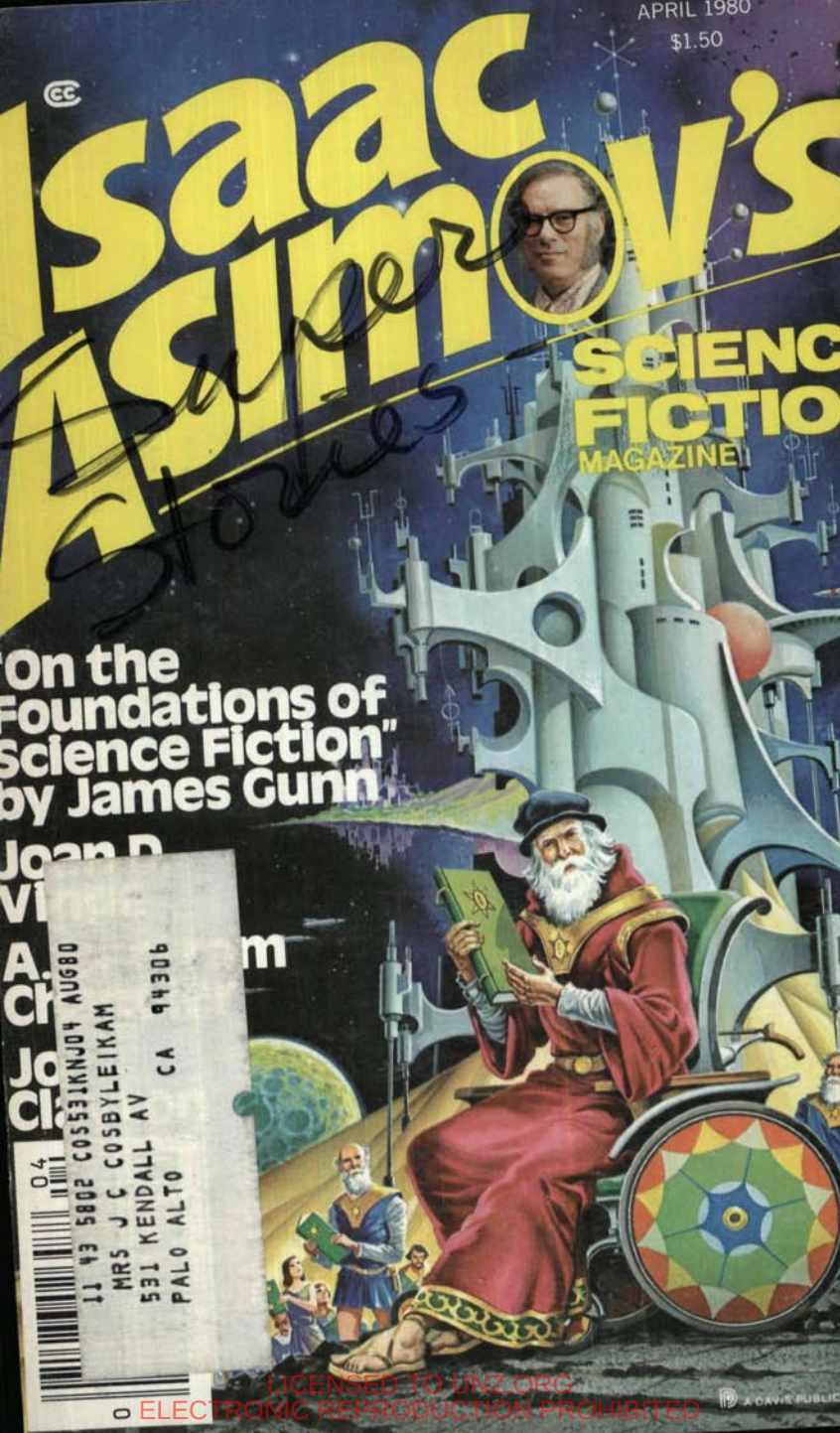

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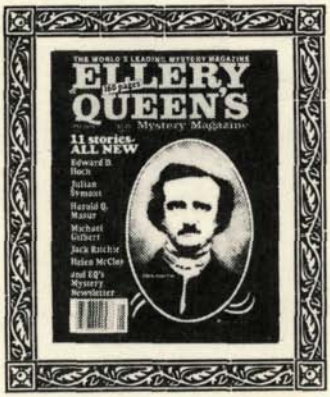

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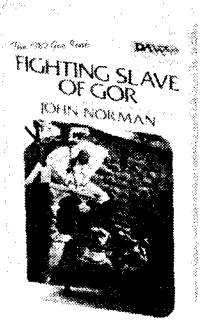

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EDITORIAL: THE SOLAR SYSTEM

by Isaac Asimov

art: Frank Kelly Freas

Last month, I discussed problems of terminology involving the Sun and Moon. Let's continue.

The Sun and all the bodies that circle it, are referred to, *en masse*, as "the Solar system." This comes from the Latin word "Sol" for Sun, and properly indicates the predominance of the Sun. The Sun contains well over 99 percent of the mass of the Solar system, so that to any objective observer, it would seem that the Solar system consists of the Sun and some inconsiderable debris. It is only our special position on one of the pieces of debris that focuses our attention on objects in the Solar system.

The term "Solar system" (or its equivalent in other languages) is comparatively modern. It came into use only after it was understood that the Sun was the center about which everything else in the system revolved.

Science fiction writers and readers, however, often deal with other systems consisting of a central star and its attendant bodies. What do we call them? The temptation is to speak of "other Solar systems,"* but that is like having an Englishman speak of other nations as "other Englands." You would know what he meant but it could lend itself to misinterpretation.

Since "Solar system" is named for Sol, the star that centers it, we could speak, individually, of "the Sirian system," "the Capellan system," "the Denebian system," or so on. For a general term, the temptation would be to speak of "stellar systems," from the Latin "stella" meaning "star."

Unfortunately, a stellar system is a term that can be applied to collections of bodies that include more than one star. A double star

*Lately, people have been speaking of "other galaxies" when they mean "other Solar systems," a kind of TV-illiteracy that is analogous to saying "other continents" when you mean "other towns."

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or a star cluster might be a stellar system. If we want to speak of one particular star and its attendant planets only, we would have to speak of a "planetary system."

By analogy, if we want to speak of a particular planet and its attendant satellites, we would speak of a "satellite system." (Strictly speaking, one might expect "satellitary system" but such an adjectival form is too clumsy and is never used.)

Our own planetary system, the Solar system, consists of more than the Sun, the planets, and the satellites.

Beginning in 1801, small bodies were discovered with orbits lying between those of Mars and Jupiter. William Herschel early suggested that these be termed "asteroids," from a Greek word meaning "star-like." He suggested this because, through the telescope, the asteroids remained points of light in appearance, like the stars, rather than expanding into visible orbs as the other planets did. (The reason for this was that the new bodies were so much smaller than the longer-known planets.)

The term, asteroid, made some people uncomfortable. After all, the asteroids were not star-like in any way except their appearance through a telescope. Other names were therefore substituted. Sometimes, they were called "planetoids," meaning "planet-like"; but if you stop to think of it, that's unfair. The asteroids are non-luminous bodies circling the Sun, and that makes them planets and not merely planet-like.

But if their only difference, compared to other planets, is their small size, they might be called "minor planets." They might even be called "planetesimals," the "-esimal" suffix indicating small size by analogy with the term "infinitesimal."

These, however, are relative terms; and we might imagine that an intelligent inhabitant of Jupiter would be only too prone to classify Earth as a minor planet, or even as a planetesimal. In addition, the word, planetesimal, is already in use for the small objects that coalesced to form the planets during the early stages of the formation of the Solar system.

We are therefore forced back to "asteroid," which is, and will probably remain, the most common term for very small planets. The region between Mars and Jupiter is commonly termed the "asteroid belt" since that is where most of the asteroids are found, although some are now known that approach the Sun more closely than Mercury does, and others that recede as far from the Sun as Uranus does.

If the only difference between a planet and an asteroid is the

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matter of size, what particular size shall we set up as the boundary? That's purely arbitrary, of course; but in our own planetary system, the smallest object generally accepted as a planet is Mercury, which has a diameter of about 5,000 kilometers. The largest object generally accepted as an asteroid is Ceres, which has a diameter of about 1,000 kilometers.

It would seem that, in general, we might therefore take 1,000 kilometers as a nice round dividing point. Any object with a diameter of 1,000 kilometers or less that circles a star is an asteroid; anything larger is a planet.

There are at least eight satellites (including the Moon) that have diameters of more than 1,000 kilometers, and that would be considered respectable planets if they circled the Sun directly. Still, they don't, so satellites they remain.

Very small satellites could be referred to as satellitesimals according to the dictionary, but I have never seen or heard the term used.

To another subject. Every once in a while, if we watch the sky on a dark night, we will see a streak of light that will only last a few seconds. A small body has entered the atmosphere, and air resistance has raised its temperature to the point of incandescence. In English, the streak of light is called a "shooting star."

The Greeks, however, did not consider the streak to be a star. They considered it, rightly, a phenomenon of Earth's atmosphere, rather than of the sky; and so it is called a "meteor" from Greek words meaning "the upper atmosphere." (The study of the atmospheric changes that produce our weather is called "meteorology" for this reason, and has nothing to do with meteors. The study of meteors is "meteoritics.")

The term "meteor" refers only to the streak of light, by the way, and not to the object that produces it. If a part of the object survives its trip through the atmosphere, then a lump of rock or metal will strike Earth's surface. That lump of matter is *not* a meteor. It is a "meteorite," the "-ite" suffix being generally used by geologists for rocks and minerals.

What's more, if one encounters the body before it strikes the Earth's atmosphere, so that it is not glowing, it is not a meteor then, either. (Shades of all those science-fiction stories, including some of mine, that have had spaceships demolished by meteors.) In space, the object is a "meteoroid," by analogy with asteroid.

A meteoroid is actually a very small asteroid, and there is no real

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distinction between the two, except that of size. We might argue that any planetary object with a diameter greater than one kilometer is an asteroid, anything smaller is a meteroid; but that is purely my own personal boundary line.

Very small meteoroids, the size of pieces of grit or less, could be called "micrometeoroids" or "meteoric dust."

What about the strangely-shaped, fuzzy patches of light that appear in the skies now and then? To the Greeks, they were "aster kometes" ("hairy stars") and so we now call them "comets."

Strictly speaking, a comet is only the glowing object seen in our skies. The object is then close enough to the Sun for its substance to be vaporized in part. A haze is produced about it ("coma") and this is driven outward by the Solar wind to form its "tail."

Comets have elongated orbits; and when they are in the outer Solar system, they are cold and perfectly solid since they are then far from the vaporizing action of Solar heat. At those times, comets are indistinguishable from small asteroids to the casual glance. The actual difference is entirely a matter of composition. The asteroids are made up of involatile material, and do not vaporize even when they move into the inner Solar system. The comet is made up partly or nearly entirely of volatile material, and will evaporate.

It is my idea that the cometary body in its cold, solid state, ought to be called a "cometoid" in analogy to asteroid; but I must admit I have never seen or heard anyone else use that term.

But enough.

I'll take up nomenclature of objects beyond our Solar system in some other editorial in the future, when you have completely recovered from this and the preceding one.

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ON BOOKS
by Baird Searles

Books to be reviewed by Mr. Searles should be sent to him at The SF Shop, 56 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10014. And if your local, non-specialized bookstore has difficulty in ordering these (or any other SF titles), we direct your attention to the specialty SF bookstores who advertise in the classified sections of this and every issue of the magazine.
—The Editor

Empire of the East by Fred Saberhagen, Ace, $6.95 (paper).
Yearwood by Paul Hazel, Atlantic-Little, Brown, $10.95.
Magic Time by Kit Reed, Berkley, $10.95.
The Golden Gryphon Feather by Richard Purtill, DAW, $1.75 (paper).
The Reign of Wizardry by Jack Williamson, Phantasia Press, $15.00.
A Tolkien Bestiary by David Day, Ballantine, $19.95.
Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien, Houghton Mifflin, $29.95.
The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien, The Folio Society, $19.95 (by subscription only; for information contact The Folio Society, 113 E. 55 St., New York, N.Y. 10022).
Green Magic by Jack Vance, Underwood Miller, $15.00.
A Dreamer's Tales by Lord Dunsany, Owlswick Press, $12.75.

Regular readers will have noticed that I tend to devote a fair amount of space monthly to reprints. While this may be boring to the aging science fiction fan who has read everything, I feel that SF, of all the literary genres, has the most varied and fascinating "backlist" of wonderful works, worth calling attention to when they come back into print for the younger reader who may not know about them. I know that in my early teens, in the first rhapsodic rush of discovering the field, my greatest need was to find out about all the older works I might have missed (and there were a great deal fewer of them way back then).

And even the aging science fiction fan might appreciate knowing a certain work was back in print, since his cockerpoo had chewed up the priceless first edition.

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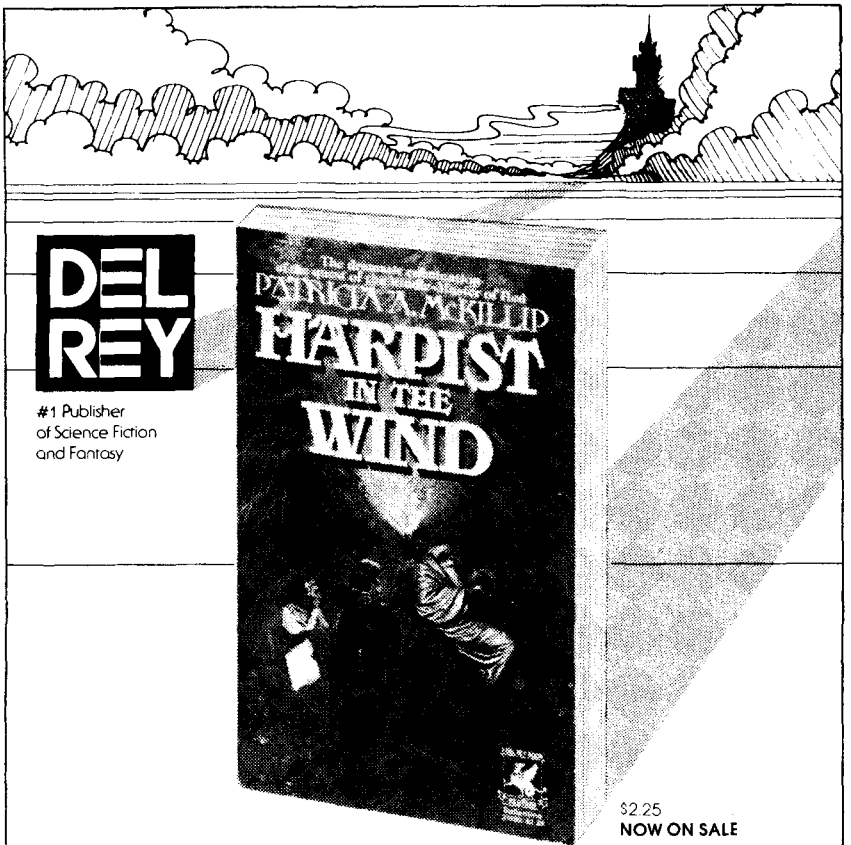

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I'm leading off this month with something that is not quite a reprint; the copyright page explains that "the parts of this work have been published in substantially different form." The rewritten omnibus volume is now called *Empire of the East*; the author is Fred Saberhagen, and the earlier form was three volumes entitled *The Broken Lands, The Black Mountains,* and *Changeling Earth*. I had not read the older version, so I don't know exactly how much rewriting has been done; but this new incarnation is indeed what could be called in the current neo-Edwardian parlance, a "ripping yarn." It is published as one of those large format "trade" paperbacks, and this one just might be worth the price.

Empire of the East is a book the reviewer is hesitant to say too much about because of the continual surprises the author springs on the reader. In fact, one of Mr. Saberhagen's great talents is a sense of rhythm; just as matters start to flag, he pulls a new character, or idea, or plot twist out of left field. Sometimes they come completely out of the blue, or even better, as something which has been subtly set up much earlier, but for which you are totally unprepared.

But just a hint as to the book's idea. It is the classic plot where, on an Earth of the far future, the good guys (the kingdoms of the West) are under the domination of the bad guys (the Empire of the East), and revolt. Now the power of the East lies in magic, control of various demons, and other such paraphernalia of the fantastic; but the West can also come up with some surprises, such as their own magicians and an elemental or two.

Aha, you say, it's a fantasy, despite its future setting. Well, —er, no, not quite, but again, I don't want to spoil anything. Let's say it's the most seamless splicing of SF and fantasy I've found since Bradley's Darkover came into being, though the flavor of Saberhagen's work is very different.

I can also note that there are several heroes and heroines in this sprawling (but ultimately well-knit) novel, at least two of which are pretty unlikely candidates for that title when first met.

All in all, I had a lot of fun with this one and I think anyone who is into adventure SF/fantasy (awkward term) with some really clever conceptualizing will, too.

On the other hand, *Yearwood* by Paul Hazel is a true fantasy and a true original, perhaps too much so for its own good.

In precis, the plot isn't. It is the old, old one about the youth searching for his father and his inheritance—and it's certainly not

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to spoil anything to say that the father here is a High King and the inheritance is a kingdom.

But nothing else in this book is quite like anything I've ever encountered before, except maybe the primal myths that are the basis for all of this sort of heroic fantasy. The author has chosen to write in a formal, almost stilted style that evokes the ancient. Here, for instance, are the first two sentences of the book:

"My mother and her women are of the bitter lineage of the Selchie, the spawn of sealmen and shore folk. In their blood the memory of the undersea kingdoms still rages."

The short, sharp sentences used throughout, and the simple but almost always poetic metaphors and similes (". . . dark as the holes between the stars") have the flavor of the not unsophisticated primitive, and preclude the need for archaisms.

The world is one of Celtic myth (even specifically Scots, but that's a guess), but the action and situations sometimes have a very specific relation to Norse/Germanic legend. Magic is prevalent—of many varieties—and is so a part of life that it is used almost automatically, as any inherent talent is; there is no sense of magic being a sort of learned pseudo-science with its own rules, as it seems in so many recent fantasies.

The nameless hero (his name—or names—is part of the quest) leaves the castle of his foster father and witch mother in search of his heritage, a search in which bloodshed, murder, incest, witchcraft, creatures of the sea, and a ship of the dead play their part. There are ancient magic forests and speaking birds, ghosts of kings and, of course, a sword.

I think that which sets *Yearwood* apart is its darkness. One has heard of the Celtic twilight, but this is the Celtic midnight. There are no lightsome elves, no comic relief, no love even. This unrelenting dourness and the opaque style make *Yearwood* pretty heavy going. In fact, I wonder a little as to who will like it. The fantasy lovers, currently into talking dragons, kind old magicians, and noble heroines, will certainly be put off by its brutal non-romanticism. The stylists who might appreciate the extraordinary writing won't take to its myth and magic subject matter.

For myself, the novel amply repaid any slogging I had to do, and I more than look forward to the two books to follow. (Yes, it's the first of a trilogy, and in this case, that's good news.)

Lord, I'm tired of the last decade's host of books about the near future full of drugs, sex, and violence. Not that it isn't a likely near

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future, but I live too close to the roots of it to want to read of its flowering. (Block that metaphor!) And somehow the style these are presented in always has the hip, zap-boom-crash superficiality that reminds me of nothing more than the comics. Most of them, in fact, seem like underground comix (sic) that have wandered onto the printed page by some untoward accident.

Kit Reed is too good a writer to sink quite this low, but her latest novel, *Magic Time, is* one of those futures. And she has chosen as her metaphorical setting the theme/amusement park á la Disney World, wherein she has certainly done her homework since her Happy Habitat is staffed chockablock with those perpetually smiling, all-American types with which Disney World is full. (You can't help wondering if they're not really the next generation of Disney robots.)

But we are not concerned with these, but with four disparate losers who have been dragooned into Happy Habitat in one way or another. Evaline is an "Oldie But Goodie" who has had herself surgically lifted (almost everywhere) into phony youthfulness. Boone is a failed holofilm maker hired to record the great moments of the life of a nitwit executive. Luce is a macho lady who has beaned her boring househusband with a lamp and is probably wanted for murder. And Kaa Nąaji is a gentle Indian scientist who has solved his country's energy crisis forever by finding an efficient way to use cow dung.

This loony quartet become involved with each other as well as the inner workings of Happy Habitat and discover that All Is Not What It Seems. For one thing, HH is using (and killing off) real people in its True Life Adventures. For another, there are even more despicable things afoot with a plot to eliminate the rest of the world, leaving only Happy Habitat to carry on man's future.

Despite being a bit too close to *Westworld* and *Futureworld* at times, *Magic Time* zips along nicely, and has some truly inspired comic moments, such as the one in which Evaline grabs a dear little artificial bunny that has been tailing her, and stuffs it down the throat of one of the artificial pelicans who are really there as repositories for the trash that the artificial doggies sweep up.

There *is* a comic-strip air about the baddies who run Happy Habitat—they're so incompetent one can't imagine them running a slot machine—but I guess if I have to have a near, dreary-future novel, it may as well be by Kit Reed.

I'm a sucker for Minoan Crete; anyone who likes Mary Renault's

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The King Must Die is a candidate for friend-for-life. Two books dealing with the Minoans are to hand, one new, one an oldie.

Richard Purtill, in *The Golden Gryphon Feather,* starts out on dangerous ground: he seems to be retelling the Theseus legend with a female Theseus; and there are strong echoes of the Renault books, up to and including the Athenian "sacrifices" singing and dancing as they come into the harbor at Crete.

But soon after that, thank goodness, he takes off in an entirely different direction. The Athenians do indeed dance with the bulls, but there is also the Path, a strange variant of the Labyrinth, which in our heroine's case leads her to the Bright Land, Olympus, another cosmos where the gods live. Purtill's version/vision of the Olympians is a fresh and interesting one, and their involvement with the story of the Minotaur, Minos, and Ariadne is equally so. One is reminded slightly of the historical fantasies of Thomas Burnett Swann, but Purtill is a little more straightforward, a little less fey. George Barr's cover and interior illustrations complement the book beautifully, as usual.

Our other entry into the Minoan world is through Jack Williamson's *The Reign of Wizardry,* first published in the pages of *Unknown* in 1940. I'm afraid that this novel is not one of those that that great, relatively short-lived magazine is remembered for.

This one *is* a retelling of the Theseus legend, with Theseus as presented here just one step above Conan as Neanderthal hero. Minoan Crete is a den of really unpleasant sorcerers, with Minos and Daedalus vying for most unpleasant, and Ariadne as a lady no better than she should be.

But with a little historical perspective, it's a good enough slam-bang pulp adventure to be worth the short time it will take to read. Whether it's worth publishing in hard cover for a bemused posterity is another question.

I might note that Steve Fabian, who did the dust-jacket painting, might have done a modicum of research into the Minoan female costume, which was a great deal handsomer and sexier than the odd number in which he's clothed Ariadne. It looks like a cast-off from the wardrobe of Flexie La Pex (my favorite stripper).

More and more of these books aimed at collectors are appearing, along a broad spectrum ranging from art books to reprints of obscure material such as the above. There seems to be a market for them, as they keep coming. Here are a few more recent publications in that line:

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The Tolkieniana doesn't seem to stop, though despite the general level of good taste displayed, I wish it would. There's a new flossy glossary called *A Tolkien Bestiary,* along the lines of the several other *Who's Who in Middle Earth*–type volumes that have already appeared. "Bestiary" is a misnomer despite an attempt at justification by author David Day in his introduction—pipe weed is not a beast. That quibble aside, it seems nicely written and presented, contains maps, genealogies, and chronologies as well as its main alphabetical listing of places, peoples, and things, and certainly doesn't lack for illustration—one per page, many in color, and the products of eleven artists. The results are mixed, to say the least.

Therefore it's a relief to turn to *Pictures By J. R. R. Tolkien* devoted to the drawings and paintings of the master himself. They are charming primitives, many of them familiar to us from the various Tolkien editions we grew up with, but here presented in an eminently satisfying size and format, with notes on each picture by Christopher Tolkien. It's a beautiful production marred by a tacky slipcase that looks like an imitation-leather desk blotter.

Folio Society editions are available only to Folio Society subscribers (see opening list for address for information), but their new edition of *The Hobbit* demands to be mentioned. Bound to match their earlier edition of *The Lord of the Rings* (which was illustrated by the now Queen of Denmark), it has illustrations by Eric Fraser, and better ones I've not seen outside of Tolkien's own. Starkly simple, giving the impression of wood-block prints, they're a far cry from the ornately baroque fairy-tale calendar-art we've been getting for years (Whelan's painting in the current calendar the exception).

Now let's declare a moratorium on Tolkien for at least a decade and hope the publishers do, too.

Green Magic, a collection of short stories by Jack Vance, is everything a collector's edition should be: a good-looking book, well-illustrated (one for each story by one of seven artists—the frontispiece ((George Barr again)) is a knockout) and with an excellent selection of stories, ranging from 1950 to 1967. They include "The Moon Moth," in which a detective tries to track a man down in a culture where masks are *de rigueur* and conversation is sung; "The Miracle Worker," of novelette length, slightly similar in feel to *The Dragon Masters* though published some years earlier; "The Men Return," about an Earth where the laws of cause and effect have vanished, and "Liane, the Wayfarer," familiar from *The Dying Earth*. There are nine stories in all, and it's a really good collection. One wonders,

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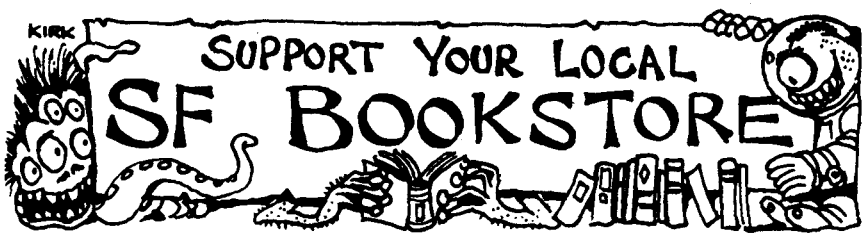
of course, if there could be such a thing as a *bad* Vance collection. He is the Lord Dunsany of our time; one has to go that far back to find short stories of such equivalent jewelled prose and subtle irony.

Which leads us neatly and finally into noting the recent edition of Dunsany's *A Dreamer's Tales,* illustrated by Tim Kirk, and a companion volume to the same publisher's edition of Dunsany's *Tales of Three Hemispheres.*



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The author was born in Baltimore MD in 1948, and started making up stories to put herself to sleep before she was three. Originally, she says, she wanted to be an artist, but somehow ended up with a degree in anthropology and working as a salvage archaeologist. This worked out all right, though, since she's since figured out that "archaeology is the anthropology of the past and science fiction is the anthropology of the future." Her story "Eyes of Amber" won the 1977 Hugo Award for Best Novelette, and two of her works were nominated for Hugos in 1979. Her next novel, The Snow Queen, *will be out from Quantum Books in April 1980. She lives in Chappaqua NY at the top of a* very *steep driveway and has a cat named Misty.*

They said that in those days the lands were cursed that lay in the shadow of the Storm King. The peak thrust up from the gently rolling hills and fertile farmlands like an impossible wave cresting on the open sea, a brooding finger probing the secrets of heaven. Once it had vomited fire and fumes; ash and molten stone had poured from its throat; the distant ancestors of the people who lived beneath it now had died of its wrath. But the Earth had spent Her fury in one final cataclysm, and now the mountain lay quiet, dark, and cold, its mouth choked with congealed stone.

And yet still the people lived in fear. No one among them remembered having seen its summit, which was always crowned by cloud; lightning played in the purple, shrouding robes; and distant thunder filled the dreams of the folk who slept below with the roaring of dragons.

For it was a dragon who had come to dwell among the crags: that elemental focus of all storm and fire carried on the wind, drawn to a place where the Earth's fire had died, a place still haunted by ancient grief. And sharing the spirit of fire, the dragon knew no law and obeyed no power except its own. By day or night it would rise on furious wings of wind and sweep over the land, inundating the crops with rain, blasting trees with its lightning, battering walls

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and tearing away rooftops; terrifying rich and poor, man and beast, for the sheer pleasure of destruction, the exaltation of uncontrolled power. The people had prayed to the new gods who had replaced their worship of the Earth to deliver them; but the new gods made Their home in the sky, and seemed to be beyond hearing.

By now the people had made Their names into curses, as they pried their oxcarts from the mud or looked out over fields of broken grain and felt their bellies and their children's bellies tighten with hunger. And they would look toward the distant peak and curse the Storm King, naming the peak and the dragon both; but always in whispers and mutters, for fear the wind would hear them, and bring the dark storm sweeping down on them again.

The storm-wracked town of Wyddon and its people looked up only briefly in their sullen shaking-off and shoveling-out of mud as a stranger picked his way among them. He wore the woven leather of a common soldier, his cloak and leggings were coarse and ragged, and he walked the planks laid down in the stinking street as though determination alone kept him on his feet. A woman picking through baskets of stunted leeks in the marketplace saw with vague surprise that he had entered the tiny village temple; a man putting fresh thatch on a torn-open roof saw him come out again, propelled by the indignant, orange-robed priest.

"If you want witchery, find yourself a witch! This is a holy place; the gods don't meddle in vulgar magic!"

"I can see that," the stranger muttered, staggering in ankle-deep mud. He climbed back onto the boards with some difficulty and obvious disgust. "Maybe if they did you'd have streets and not rivers of muck in this town." He turned away in anger, almost stumbled over a mud-colored girl blocking his forward progress on the boardwalk.

"You priests should bow down to the Storm King!" The girl postured insolently, looking toward the priest. "The dragon can change all our lives more in one night than your gods have done in a lifetime."

"Slut!" The priest shook his carven staff at her; its necklace of golden bells chimed like absurd laughter. "There's a witch for you, beggar. If you think she can teach you to tame the dragon, then go with her!" He turned away, disappearing into the temple. The stranger's body jerked, as though it strained against his control, wanting to strike at the priest's retreating back.

"You're a witch?" The stranger turned and glared down at the

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bony figure standing in his way, found her studying him back with obvious skepticism. He imagined what she saw—a foreigner, his straight black hair whacked off like a serf's, his clothes crawling with filth, his face grimed and gaunt and set in a bitter grimace. He frowned more deeply.

The girl shook her head. "No. I'm just bound to her. You have business to take up with her, I see—about the Storm King." She smirked, expecting him to believe she was privy to secret knowledge.

"As you doubtless overheard, yes." He shifted his weight from one leg to the other, trying fruitlessly to ease the pain in his back.

She shrugged, pushing her own tangled brown hair back from her face. "Well, you'd better be able to pay for it, or you've come a long way from Kwansai for nothing."

He started, before he realized that his coloring and his eyes gave that much away. "I can pay." He drew his dagger from its hidden sheath, the only weapon he had left, and the only thing of value. He let her glimpse the jeweled hilt before he pushed it back out of sight.

Her gray eyes widened briefly. "What do I call you, Prince of Thieves?" with another glance at his rags.

"Call me Your Highness," not lying, and not quite joking.

She looked up into his face again, and away. "Call me Nothing, Your Highness. Because I am nothing." She twitched a shoulder at him. "And follow me."

They passed the last houses of the village without further speech, and followed the mucky track on into the dark, dripping forest that lay at the mountain's feet. The girl stepped off the road and into the trees without warning; he followed her recklessly, half angry and half afraid that she was abandoning him. But she danced ahead of him through the pines, staying always in sight, although she was plainly impatient with his own lagging pace. The dank chill of the sunless wood gnawed his aching back and swarms of stinging gnats feasted on his exposed skin; the bare-armed girl seemed as oblivious to the insects as she was to the cold.

He pushed on grimly, as he had pushed on until now, having no choice but to keep on or die. And at last his persistence was rewarded; he saw the forest rise ahead, and buried in the flank of the hillside among the trees was a mossy hut linteled by immense stones.

The girl disappeared into the hut as he entered the clearing before it. He slowed, looking around him at the clusters of carven images

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pushing up like unnatural growths from the spongy ground, or dangling from tree limbs. Most of the images were subtly or blatantly obscene. He averted his eyes and limped between them to the hut's entrance.

He stepped through the doorway without waiting for an invitation, to find the girl crouched by the hearth in the hut's cramped interior, wearing the secret smile of a cat. Beside her an incredibly wrinkled, ancient woman sat on a three-legged stool. The legs were carved into shapes that made him look away again, back at the wrinkled face and the black, buried eyes that regarded him with flinty bemusement. He noticed abruptly that there was no wall behind her: the far side of the hut melted into the black volcanic stone, a natural fissure opening into the mountain's side.

"So, Your Highness, you've come all the way from Kwansai seeking the Storm King, and a way to tame its power?"

He wrapped his cloak closely about him and grimaced, the nearest thing to a smile of scorn that he could manage. "Your girl has a quick tongue. But I've come to the wrong place, it seems, for real power."

"Don't be so sure!" The old woman leaned toward him, shrill and spiteful. "You can't afford to be too sure of anything, Lassan-din. You were prince of Kwansai; you should have been king there when your father died, and overlord of these lands as well. And now you're nobody and you have no home, no friends, barely even your life. Nothing is what it seems to be . . . it never is."

Lassan-din's mouth went slack; he closed it, speechless at last. *Nothing is what it seems.* The girl called Nothing grinned up at him from the floor. He took a deep breath, shifting to ease his back again. "Then you know what I've come for, if you already know that much, witch."

The hag half-rose from her obscene stool; he glimpsed a flash of color, a brighter, finer garment hidden beneath the drab outer robe she wore—the way the inner woman still burned fiercely bright in her eyes, showing through the wasted flesh of her ancient body. "Call me no names, you prince of beggars! I am the Earth's Own. Your puny Kwansai priests, who call my sisterhood 'witch', who destroyed our holy places and drove us into hiding, know nothing of power. They're fools; they don't believe in power and they are powerless, charlatans. You know it or you wouldn't be here!" She settled back, wheezing. "Yes, I could tell you what you want; but suppose you tell me."

"I want what's mine! I want my kingdom." He paced restlessly,

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two steps and then back. "I know of elementals, all the old legends. My people say that dragons are stormbringers, born from a joining of Fire and Water and Air, three of the four Primes of Existence. Nothing but the Earth can defy their fury. And I know that if I can hold a dragon in its lair with the right spells, it must give me what I want, like the heroes of the Golden Time. I want to use its power to take back my lands."

"You don't want much, do you?" The old woman rose from her seat and turned her back on him, throwing a surreptitious handful of something into the fire, making it flare up balefully. She stirred the pot that hung from a hook above it, spitting five times into the noxious brew as she stirred. Lassan-din felt his empty stomach turn over. "If you want to challenge the Storm King, you should be out there climbing, not here holding your hand out to me."

"Damn you!" His exasperation broke loose, and his hand wrenched her around to face him. "I need some spell, some magic, some way to pen a dragon up. I can't do it with my bare hands!"

She shook her head, unintimidated, and leered toothlessly at him. "My power comes to me through my body, up from the Earth Our Mother. She won't listen to a man—especially one who would destroy Her worship. Ask your priests who worship the air to teach you their empty prayers."

He saw the hatred rising in her, and felt it answered: The dagger was out of its hidden sheath and in his hand before he knew it, pressing the soft folds of her neck. "I don't believe you, witch. See this dagger—" quietly, deadly. "If you give me what I want, you'll have the jewels in its hilt. If you don't, you'll feel its blade cut your throat."

"All right, all right!" She strained back as the blade's tip began to bite. He let her go. She felt her neck; the girl sat perfectly still at their feet, watching. "I can give you something—a spell. I can't guarantee She'll listen. But you have enough hatred in you for ten men—and maybe that will make your man's voice loud enough to penetrate Her skin. This mountain is sacred to Her. She still listens through its ears, even if She no longer breathes here."

"Never mind the superstitious drivel. Just tell me how I can keep the dragon in without it striking me dead with its lightning. How I can fight fire with fire—"

"You don't fight fire with fire. You fight fire with water."

He stared at her; at the obviousness of it, and the absurdity—"The dragon is the creator of storm. How can mere water—?"

"A dragon is anathema. Remember that, prince who would be

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king. It is chaos, power uncontrolled; and power always has a price. That's the key to everything. I can teach you the spell for controlling the waters of the Earth; but you're the one who must use it."

He stayed with the women through the day, and learned as the hours passed to believe in the mysteries of the Earth. The crone spoke words that brought water fountaining up from the well outside her door while he looked on in amazement, his weariness and pain forgotten. As he watched she made a brook flow upstream; made crystal droplets beading the forest pines join in a diadem to crown his head, and then with a word released them to run cold and helpless as tears into the collar of his ragged tunic.

She seized the fury that rose up in him at her insolence, and challenged him to do the same. He repeated the ungainly, ancient spellwords defiantly, arrogantly, and nothing happened. She scoffed, his anger grew; she jeered and it grew stronger. He repeated the spell again, and again, and again . . . until at last he felt the terrifying presence of an alien power rise in his body, answering the call of his blood. The droplets on the trees began to shiver and commingle; he watched an eddy form in the swift clear water of the stream— The Earth had answered him.

His anger failed him at the unbelievable sight of his success . . . and the power failed him too. Dazed and strengthless, at last he knew his anger for the only emotion with the depth or urgency to move the body of the Earth, or even his own. But he had done the impossible—made the Earth move to a man's bidding. He had proved his right to be a king, proved that he could force the dragon to serve him as well. He laughed out loud. The old woman moaned and spat, twisting her hands that were like gnarled roots, mumbling curses. She shuffled away toward the woods as though she were in a trance; turned back abruptly as she reached the trees, pointing past him at the girl standing like a ghost in the hut's doorway. "You think you've known the Earth; that you own Her, now. You think you can take anything and make it yours. But you're as empty as that one, and as powerless!" And she was gone.

Night had fallen through the dreary wood without his realizing it. The girl Nothing led him back into the hut, shared a bowl of thick, strangely herbed soup and a piece of stale bread with him. He ate gratefully but numbly, the first warm meal he had eaten in weeks; his mind drifted into waking dreams of banqueting until dawn in royal halls.

When he had eaten his share, wiping the bowl shamelessly with

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a crust, he stood and walked the few paces to the hut's furthest corner. He lay down on the hard stone by the cave mouth, wrapping his cloak around him, and closed his eyes. Sleep's darker cloak settled over him.

And then, dimly, he became aware that the girl had followed him, stood above him looking down. He opened his eyes unwillingly, to see her unbelt her tunic and pull it off, kneel down naked at his side. A piece of rock crystal, perfectly transparent, perfectly formed, hung glittering coldly against her chest. He kept his eyes open, saying nothing.

"The Old One won't be back until you're gone; the sight of a man calling on the Earth was too strong for her." Her hand moved insinuatingly along his thigh.

He rolled away from her, choking on a curse as his back hurt him sharply. "I'm tired. Let me sleep."

"I can help you. She could have told you more. I'll help you tomorrow . . . if you lie with me tonight."

He looked up at her, suddenly despairing. "Take my body, then; but it won't give you much pleasure." He pulled up the back of his tunic, baring the livid scar low on his spine. "My uncle didn't make a cripple of me—but he might as well have." When he even thought of a woman there was only pain, only rage . . . only that.

She put her hand on the scar with surprising gentleness. "I can help that too . . . for tonight." She went away, returned with a small jar of ointment and rubbed the salve slowly into his scarred back. A strange, cold heat sank through him; a sensuous tingling swept away the grinding ache that had been his only companion through these long months of exile. He let his breath out in an astonished sigh, and the girl lay down beside him, pulling at his clothes.

Her thin body was as hard and bony as a boy's, but she made him forget that. She made him forget everything, except that tonight he was free from pain and sorrow; tonight he lay with a woman who desired him, no matter what her reason. He remembered lost pleasure, lost joy, lost youth, only yesterday . . . until yesterday became tomorrow.

In the morning he woke, in pain, alone and fully clothed, aching on the hard ground. *Nothing*. . . . He opened his eyes and saw her standing at the fire, stirring a kettle. *A dream—?* The cruel betrayal that was reality returned tenfold.

They ate together in a silence that was sullen on his part and inscrutable on hers. After last night it seemed obvious to him that

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she was older than she looked—as obvious as the way he himself had changed from boy to old man in a span of months. And he felt an insubstantiality about her that he had not noticed before, an elusiveness that might only have been an echo of his dream. "I dreamed, last night . . ."

"I know." She climbed to her feet, cutting him off, combing her snarled hair back with her fingers. "You dream loudly." Her face was closed.

He felt a frown settle between his eyes again. "I have a long climb. I'd better get started." He pushed himself up and moved stiffly toward the doorway. The old hag still had not returned.

"Not that way," the girl said abruptly. "This way." She pointed as he turned back, toward the cleft in the rock.

He stood still. "That will take me to the dragon?"

"Only part way. But it's easier by half. I'll show you." She jerked a brand out of the fire and started into the maw of darkness.

He went after her with only a moment's uncertainty. He had lived in fear for too long; if he was afraid to follow this witch-girl into her Goddess's womb, then he would never have the courage to challenge the Storm King.

The low-ceilinged cleft angled steeply upward, a natural tube formed millennia ago by congealing lava. The girl began to climb confidently, as though she trusted some guardian power to place her hands and feet surely—a power he could not depend on as he followed her up the shaft. The dim light of day snuffed out behind him, leaving only her torch to guide them through utter blackness, over rock that was alternately rough enough to flay the skin from his hands and slick enough to give him no purchase at all. The tunnel twisted like a worm, widening, narrowing, steepening, folding back on itself in an agony of contortion. His body protested its own agony as he dragged it up handholds in a sheer rock face, twisted it, wrenched it, battered it against the unyielding stone. The acrid smoke from the girl's torch stung his eyes and clogged his lungs; but it never seemed to slow her own tireless motion, and she took no pity on his weakness. Only the knowledge of the distance he had come kept him from demanding that they turn back; he could not believe that this could possibly be an easier way than climbing the outside of the mountain. It began to seem to him that he had been climbing through this foul blackness for all of eternity, that this was another dream like his dream last night, but one that would never end.

The girl chanted softly to herself now; he could just hear her above

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his own labored breathing. He wondered jealously if she was drawing strength from the very stone around them, the body of the Earth. He could feel no pulse in the cold heart of the rock; and yet after yesterday he did not doubt its presence, even wondering if the Earth sapped his own strength with preternatural malevolence. *I am a man, I will be a king!* he thought defiantly. And the way grew steeper, and his hands bled.

"Wait—!" He gasped out the word at last, as his feet went out from under him again and he barely saved himself from sliding back down the tunnel. "I can't go on."

The girl, crouched on a level spot above him, looked back and down at him and ground out the torch. His grunt of protest became a grunt of surprise as he saw her silhouetted against a growing gray-brightness. She disappeared from his view; the brightness dimmed and then strengthened.

He heaved himself up and over the final bend in the wormhole, into a space large enough to stand in if he had had the strength. He crawled forward hungrily into the brightness at the cave mouth, found the girl kneeling there, her face raised to the light. He welcomed the fresh air into his lungs, cold and cleansing; looked past her—and down.

They were dizzyingly high on the mountain's side, above the treeline, above a sheer, unscalable face of stone. A fast-falling torrent of water roared on their left, plunging out and down the cliff-face. The sun winked at him from the cloud-wreathed heights; its angle told him they had climbed for the better part of the day. He looked over at the girl.

"You're lucky," she said, without looking back at him. Before he could even laugh at the grotesque irony of the statement she raised her hand, pointing on up the mountainside. "The Storm King sleeps—another storm is past. I saw the rainbow break this sunrise."

He felt a surge of strength and hope, absorbed the indifferent blessing of the Holy Sun. "How long will it sleep?"

"Two more days, perhaps. You won't reach its den before night. Sleep here, and climb again tomorrow."

"And then?" He looked toward her expectantly.

She shrugged.

"I paid you well," not certain in what coin, anymore. "I want a fair return! How do I pen the beast?"

Her hand tightened around the crystal pendant hanging against her tunic. She glanced back into the cave mouth. "There are many waters flowing from the heights. One of them might be diverted to

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fall past the entrance of its lair."

"A waterfall? I might as well hold up a rose and expect it to cower!"

"Power always has its price; as the Old One said." She looked directly at him at last. "The storm rests here in mortal form—the form of the dragon. And like all mortals, it suffers. Its strength lies in the scales that cover its skin. The rain washes them away—the storm is agony to the stormbringer. They fall like jewels, they catch the light as they fall, like a trail of rainbow. It's the only rainbow anyone here has ever seen . . . a sign of hope, because it means an end to the storm; but a curse, too, because the storm will always return, endlessly."

"Then I could have it at my mercy. . . . " He heard nothing else.

"Yes. If you can make the Earth move to your will." Her voice was flat.

His hands tightened. "I have enough hate in me for that."

"And what will you demand, to ease it?" She glanced at him again, and back at the sky. "The dragon is defiling this sacred place; it should be driven out. You could become a hero to my people, if you forced the dragon to go away. A god. They need a god who can do them some good. . . . "

He felt her somehow still watching him, measuring his response, even though she had looked away. "I came here to solve my problem, not yours. I want my own kingdom, not a kingdom of mud-men. I need the dragon's power—I didn't come here to drive that away."

The girl said nothing, still staring at the sky.

"It's a simple thing for you to move the waters—why haven't you driven the dragon away yourself, then?" His voice rasped in his parched throat, sharp with unrecognized guilt.

"I'm Nothing. I have no power—the Old One holds my soul." She looked down at the crystal.

"Then why won't the Old One do it?"

"She hates, too. She hates what our people have become under the new gods, your gods. That's why she won't."

"I'd think it would give her great pleasure to prove the impotence of the new gods." His mouth stretched sourly.

"She wants to die in the Earth's time, not tomorrow." The girl folded her arms, and her own mouth twisted.

He shook his head. "I don't understand that . . . why didn't you destroy our soldiers, our priests, with your magic?"

"The Earth moves slowly to our bidding, because She is eternal. An arrow is small—but it moves swiftly."

He laughed once, appreciatively. "I understand."

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"There's a cairn of stones over there." She nodded back into the darkness. "Food is under it." He realized that this must have been a place of refuge for the women in times of persecution. "The rest is up to you." She turned, merging abruptly into the shadows.

"Wait!" he called, surprising himself. "You must be tired."

She shook her head, a deeper shadow against darkness.

"Stay with me—until morning." It was not quite a demand, not quite a question.

"Why?" He thought he saw her eyes catch light and reflect it back at him, like a wild thing's.

Because I had a dream. He did not say it, did not say anything else.

"Our debts have balanced." She moved slightly, and something landed on the ground at his feet: his dagger. The hilt was pock-marked with empty jewel settings; stripped clean. He leaned down to pick it up. When he straightened again she was gone.

"You need a light—!" He called after her again.

Her voice came back to him, from a great distance: "May you get what you deserve!" And then silence, except for the roaring of the falls.

He ate, wondering whether her last words were a benediction or a curse. He slept, and the dreams that came to him were filled with the roaring of dragons.

With the light of a new day he began to climb again, following the urgent river upward toward its source that lay hidden in the waiting crown of clouds. He remembered his own crown, and lost himself in memories of the past and future, hardly aware of the harsh sobbing of his breath, of flesh and sinew strained past a sane man's endurance. Once he had been the spoiled child of privilege, his father's only son—living in the world's eye, his every whim a command. Now he was as much Nothing as the witchgirl far down the mountain. But he would live the way he had again, his every wish granted, his power absolute—he would live that way again, if he had to climb to the gates of Heaven to win back his birthright.

The hours passed endlessly, inevitably, and all he knew was that slowly, slowly, the sky lowered above him. At last the cold, moist edge of clouds enfolded his burning body, drawing him into another world of gray mist and gray silences; black, glistening surfaces of rock; the white sound of the cataract rushing down from even higher above. Drizzling fog shrouded the distances any way he turned, and he realized that he did not know where in this layer of cloud the dragon's den lay. He had assumed that it would be obvious, he had

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trusted the girl to tell him all he needed to know. . . . Why had he trusted her? That pagan slut—his hand gripped the rough hilt of his dagger; dropped away, trembling with fatigue. He began to climb again, keeping the sound of falling water nearby for want of any other guide. The light grew vaguer and more diffuse, until the darkness falling in the outer world penetrated the fog world and the haze of his exhaustion. He lay down at last, unable to go on, and slept beneath the shelter of an overhang of rock.

He woke stupefied by daylight. The air held a strange acridness that hurt his throat, that he could not identify. The air seemed almost to crackle; his hair ruffled, although there was no wind. He pushed himself up. He knew this feeling now: a storm was coming. A storm coming . . . a storm, here? Suddenly, fully awake, he turned on his knees, peering deeper beneath the overhang that sheltered him. And in the light of dawn he could see that it was not a simple overhang, but another opening into the mountain's side—a wider, greater one, whose depths the day could not fathom. But far down in the blackness a flickering of unnatural light showed. His hair rose in the electric breeze, he felt his skin prickle. *Yes . . . yes!* A small cry escaped him. He had found it! Without even knowing it, he had slept in the mouth of the dragon's lair all night. Habit brought a thanks to the gods to his lips, until he remembered— He muttered a *thank you* to the Earth beneath him before he climbed to his feet. A brilliant flash silhouetted him; a rumble like distant thunder made the ground vibrate, and he froze. Was the dragon waking—?

But there was no further disturbance, and he breathed again. Two days, the girl had told him, the dragon might sleep. And now he had reached his final trial, the penning of the beast. Away to his right he could hear the cataract's endless song. But would there be enough water in it to block the dragon's exit? Would that be enough to keep it prisoner, or would it strike him down in lightning and thunder, and sweep his body from the heights with torrents of rain? . . . Could he even move one droplet of water, here and now? Or would he find that all the thousand doubts that gnawed inside him were not only useless but pointless?

He shook it off, moving out and down the mist-dim slope to view the cave mouth and the river tumbling past it. A thin stream of water already trickled down the face of the opening, but the main flow was diverted by a folded knot of lava. If he could twist the water's course and hold it, for just long enough . . .

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He climbed the barren face of stone at the far side of the cave mouth until he stood above it, confronting the sinuous steel and flashing white of the thing he must move. It seemed almost alive, and he felt weary, defeated, utterly insignificant at the sight of it. But the mountain on which he stood was a greater thing than even the river, and he knew that within it lay power great enough to change the water's course. But he was the conduit, his will must tap and bend the force that he had felt stir in him two days ago.

He braced his legs apart, gathered strength into himself, trying to recall the feel of magic moving in him. He recited the spell-words, the focus for the willing of power—and felt nothing. He recited the words again, putting all his concentration behind them. Again nothing. *The Earth lay silent and inert beneath his feet.*

Anger rose in him, at the Earth's disdain, and against the strange women who served Her—the jealous, demanding anger that had opened him to power before. And this time he did feel the power stir in him, sluggishly, feebly. But there was no sign of any change in the water's course. He threw all his conscious will toward change, *change, change*—but still the Earth's power faltered and mocked him. He let go of the ritual words at last, felt the tingling promise of energy die, having burned away all his own strength.

He sat down on the wet stone, listened to the river roar with laughter. He had been so sure that when he got here the force of his need would be strong enough. . . . *I have enough hate in me*, he had told the girl. But he wasn't reaching it now. Not the real hatred, that had carried him so far beyond the limits of his strength and experience. He began to concentrate on that hatred, and the reasons behind it: the loss, the pain, the hardship and fear. . . .

His father had been a great ruler over the lands that his ancestors had conquered. And he had loved his queen, Lassan-din's mother. But when she died, his unhealing grief had turned him ruthless and iron-willed. He had become a despot, capricious, cruel, never giving an inch of his power to another man—even his spoiled and insecure son. Disease had left him wasted and witless in the end. And Lassan-din, barely come to manhood, had been helpless, unable to block his jealous uncle's treachery. He had been attacked by his own guard as he prayed in the temple (*In the temple*— his mouth pulled back), and maimed, barely escaping with his life, to find that his entire world had come to an end. He had become a hunted fugitive in his own land, friendless, trusting no one—forced to lie and steal and grovel to survive. He had eaten scraps thrown out to dogs and lain on hard stones in the rain, while the festering wound in his back

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kept him from any rest. . . .

Reliving each day, each moment, of his suffering and humiliation, he felt his rage and his hunger for revenge grow hotter. The Earth hated this usurper of Her holy place, the girl had said . . . but no more than he hated the usurper of his throne. He climbed to his feet again, every muscle on fire, and held out his hands. He shouted the incantation aloud, as though it could carry all the way to his homeland. *His homeland*: he would see it again, make it his own again—

The power entered him as the final word left his mouth, paralyzing every nerve, stopping even the breath in his throat. Fear and elation were swept up together into the maelstrom of his emotions, and power exploded like a sun behind his eyes. But through the fiery haze that blinded him, he could still see the water heaved up from its bed, a steely wall crowned with white, crumbling over and down on itself. It swept toward him, a terrifying cataclysm, until he thought that he would be drowned in the rushing flood. But it passed him by where he stood, plunging on over the outcropping roof of the cave below. Eddies of foam swirled around his feet, soaking his stained leggings.

The power left him like the water's surge falling away. He took a deep breath, and another, backing out of the flood. His body moved sluggishly, drained, abandoned, an empty husk. But his mind was full with triumph and rejoicing.

The ground beneath his feet shuddered, jarring his elation, dropping him giddily back into reality. He pressed his head with his hands as pain filled his senses, a madness crowding out coherent thought—a pain that was not his own.

(Water. . . !) Not a plea, but outrage and confusion, a horror of being trapped in a flood of molten fire. *The dragon.* He realized suddenly what had invaded his mind; realized that he had never stopped to wonder how a storm might communicate with a man: Not by human speech, but by stranger, more elemental means. Water from the fall he had created must be seeping into its lair. . . . His face twisted with satisfaction. "Dragon!" He called it with his mind and his voice together.

(Who calls? Who tortures me? Who fouls my lair? Show yourself, slave!)

"Show yourself to me, Storm King! Come out of your cave and destroy me—if you can!" The wildness of his challenge was tinged with terror.

The dragon's fury filled his head until he thought that it would burst; the ground shook beneath his feet. But the rage turned to

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frustration and died, as though the gates of liquid iron had bottled it up with its possessor. He gulped air, holding his body together with an effort of will. The voice of the dragon pushed aside his thoughts again, trampled them underfoot; but he knew that it could not reach him, and he endured without weakening.

(Who are you, and why have you come?)

He sensed a grudging resignation in the formless words, the feel of a ritual as eternal as the rain.

"I am a man who should have been a king. I've come to you, who are King of Storms, for help in regaining my own kingdom."

(You ask me for that? Your needs mean nothing, human. You were born to misery, born to crawl, born to struggle and be defeated by the powers of Air and Fire and Water. You are meaningless, you are less than nothing to me!)

Lassan-din felt the truth of his own insignificance, the weight of the dragon's disdain. "That may be," he said sourly. "But this insignificant human has penned you up with the Earth's blessing, and I have no reason to ever let you go unless you pledge me your aid."

The rage of the storm beast welled up in him again, so like his own rage; it rumbled and thundered in the hollow of the mountain. But again a profound agony broke its fury, and the raging storm subsided. He caught phantom images of stone walls lit by shifting light, the smell of water.

(If you have the strength of the Earth with you, why bother me for mine?)

"The Earth moves too slowly," *and too uncertainly*, but he did not say that. "I need a fury to match my own."

(Arrogant fool,) the voice whispered, (you have no measure of my fury.)

"Your fury can crumble walls and blast towers. You can destroy a fortress castle—and the men who defend it. I know what you can do," refusing to be cowed. "And if you swear to do it for me, I'll set you free."

(You want a castle ruined. Is that all?) A tone of false reason crept into the intruding thoughts.

"No. I also want for myself a share of your strength—protection from my enemies." He had spent half a hundred cold, sleepless nights planning these words; searching his memory for pieces of dragon-lore, trying to guess the limits of its power.

(How can I give you that? I do not share my power, unless I strike you dead with it.)

"My people say that in the Golden Time the heroes wore mail

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made from dragon scales, and were invincible. Can you give me that?" He asked the question directly, knowing that the dragon might evade the truth, but that it was bound by immutable natural law and could not lie.

(I can give you that,) grudgingly. (Is that all you ask of me?)

Lassan-din hesitated. "No. One more thing." His father had taught him caution, if nothing else. "One request to be granted at some future time—a request within your power, but one you must obey."

The dragon muttered, deep within the mountainside, and Lassan-din sensed its growing distress as the water poured into the cave. (If it is within my power, then, yes!) Dark clouds of anger filled his mind. (Free me, and you will have everything you ask!) *And more*—Did he hear that last, or was it only the echoing of his own mind? (Free me, and enter my den.)

"What I undo, I can do again." He spoke the warning more to reassure himself than to remind the dragon. He gathered himself mentally, knowing this time what he was reaching toward with all his strength, made confident by his success. And the Earth answered him once more. He saw the river shift and heave again like a glistening serpent, cascading back into its original bed; opening the cave mouth to his sight, fanged and dripping. He stood alone on the hillside, deafened by his heartbeat and the crashing absence of the river's voice. And then, calling his own strength back, he slid and clambered down the hillside to the mouth of the dragon's cave.

The flickering illumination of the dragon's fire led him deep into a maze of stone passageways, his boots slipping on the wet rock. His hair stood on end and his fingertips tingled with static charge; the air reeked of ozone. The light grew stronger as he rounded a final corner of rock; blazed up, echoing and reechoing from the walls. He shouted in protest as it pinned him like a creeping insect against the cave wall.

The light faded gradually to a tolerable level, letting him observe as he was observed, taking in the towering, twisted, black-tar formations of congealed magma that walled this cavern . . . the sudden, heart-stopping vision they enclosed. He looked on the Storm King in silence for a time that seemed endless.

A glistening layer of cast-off scales was its bed, and he could scarcely tell where the mound ceased and the dragon's own body began. The dragon looked nothing like the legends described, and yet just as he had expected it to (and somehow he did not find that strange): Great mailed claws like crystal kneaded the shifting opal-

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escence of its bed; its forelegs shimmered with the flexing of its muscles. It had no hindquarters, its body tapered into the fluid coils of a snake's form woven through the glistening pile. Immense segmented wings, as leathery as a bat's, as fragile as a butterfly's, cloaked its monstrous strength. A long, sinuous neck stretched toward him; red faceted eyes shone with inner light from a face that was closest to a cat's face of all the things he knew, but fiercely fanged and grotesquely distorted. The horns of a stag sprouted from its forehead, and foxfire danced among the spines. The dragon's size was a thing that he could have described easily, and yet it was somehow immeasurable, beyond his comprehension.

This was the creature he had challenged and brought to bay with his feeble spell-casting . . . this boundless, pitiless, infinite demon of the air. His body began to tremble, having more sense than he did. But he *had* brought it to bay, taken its word-bond, and it had not blasted him the moment he entered its den. He forced his quavering voice to carry boldly, "I'm here. Where is my armor?"

(Leave your useless garments and come forward. My scales are my strength. Lie among them and cover yourself with them. But remember when you do that if you wear my mail, and share my power, you may find them hard to put off again. Do you accept that?)

"Why would I ever want to get rid of power? I accept it! Power is the center of everything."

(But power has its price, and we do not always know how high it will be.) The dragon stirred restlessly, remembering the price of power as the water still pooling on the cavern's floor seeped up through its shifting bed.

Lassan-din frowned, hearing a deceit because he expected one. He stripped off his clothing without hesitation and crossed the vast, shadow-haunted chamber to the gleaming mound. He lay down below the dragon's baleful gaze and buried himself in the cool, scintillating flecks of scale. They were damp and surprisingly light under his touch, adhering to his body like the dust rubbed from a moth's wing. When he had covered himself completely, until even his hair glistened with myriad infinitesimal lights, the dragon bent its head until the horrible mockery of a cat's face loomed above him. He cringed back as it opened its mouth, showing him row behind row of inward-turning teeth, and a glowing forge of light. It let its breath out upon him, and his sudden scream rang darkly in the chamber as lightning wrapped his unprotected body.

But the crippling lash of pain was gone as quickly as it had come, and looking at himself he found the coating of scales fused into a

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film of armor as supple as his own skin, and as much a part of him now. His scale-gloved hands met one another in wonder, the hands of an alien creature.

(Now come.) A great glittering wing extended, inviting him to climb. (Cling to me as your armor clings to you, and let me do your bidding and be done with it.)

He mounted the wing with elaborate caution, and at last sat astride the reptilian neck, clinging to it with an uncertainty that did not fully acknowledge its reality.

The dragon moved under him without ceremony or sign, slithering down from its dais of scales with a hiss and rumble that trembled the closed space. A wind rose around them with the movement; Lassan-din felt himself swallowed into a vortex of cold, terrifying force that took his breath away, blinding and deafening him as he was sucked out of the cave-darkness and into the outer air.

Lightning cracked and shuddered, penetrating his closed lids, splitting apart his consciousness; thunder clogged his chest, reverberating through his flesh and bones like the crashing fall of an avalanche. Rain lashed him, driving into his eyes, swallowing him whole but not dissolving or dissipating his armor of scales.

In the first wild moments of storm he had been piercingly aware of an agony that was not his own, a part of the dragon's being tied into his consciousness, while the fury of rain and storm fed back on their creator. But now there was no pain, no awareness of anything tangible; even the substantiality of the dragon's existence beneath him had faded. The elemental storm was all that existed now, he was aware only of its raw, unrelenting power surrounding him, sweeping him on to his destiny.

After an eternity lost in the storm he found his sight again, felt the dragon's rippling motion beneath his hands. The clouds parted and as his vision cleared he saw, ahead and below, the gray stone battlements of the castle fortress that had once been his . . . and was about to become his again. He shouted in half-mad exultation, feeling the dragon's surging, unconquerable strength become his own. He saw from his incredible height the tiny, terrified forms of those men who had defeated and tormented him, saw them cowering like worms before the doom descending upon them. And then the vision was torn apart again in a blinding explosion of energy, as lightning struck the stone towers again and again, and the screams of the fortress's defenders were lost in the avalanche of thunder. His own senses reeled, and he felt the dragon's solidness dissolve beneath him once more; with utter disbelief felt himself falling, like

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the rain. . . . "No! No—!"

But his reeling senses righted abruptly, and he found himself standing solidly on his own feet, on the smoking battlements of his castle. Storm and flame and tumbled stone were all around him, but the blackened, fear-filled faces of the beaten defenders turned as one to look up at his; their arms rose, pointing, their cries reached him dimly. An arrow struck his chest, and another struck his shoulder, staggering him; but they fell away, rattling harmlessly down his scaled body to his feet. A shaft of sunlight broke the clouds, setting afire the glittering carapace of his armor. Already the storm was beginning to dissipate; above him the dragon's retreat stained the sky with a band of rainbow scales falling. The voice of the storm touched his mind a final time, (You have what you desire. May it bring you the pleasure you deserve.)

The survivors began, one by one, to fall to their knees below him.

Lassan-din had ridden out of exile on the back of the whirlwind, and his people bowed down before him, not in welcome but in awe and terror. He reclaimed his birthright and his throne, purging his realm of those who had overthrown it with vengeful thoroughness, but never able to purge himself of the memories of what they had done to him. His treacherous uncle had been killed in the dragon's attack, robbing Lassan-din of his longed-for retribution, the payment in kind for his own crippling wound. He wore his bitterness like the glittering dragonskin, and he found that like the dragonskin it could not be cast off again. His people hated and feared him for his shining alienness; hated him all the more for his attempts to secure his place as their ruler, seeing in him the living symbol of his uncle's inhumanity, and his father's. But he knew no other way to rule them; he could only go on, as his father had done before him, proving again and again to his people that there was no escaping what he had become. Not for them, not for himself.

They called him the Storm King, and he had all the power he had ever dreamed of—but it brought him no pleasure or ease, no escape from the knowledge that he was hated or from the chronic pain of his maimed back. He was both more and less than a man, but he was no longer a man. He was only the king. His comfort and happiness mattered to no one, except that his comfort reflected their own. No thought, no word, no act affected him that was not performed out of selfishness; and more and more he withdrew from any contact with that imitation of intimacy.

He lay alone again in his chambers on a night that was black and

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formless, like all his nights. Lying between silken sheets he dreamed that he was starving and slept on stones.

Pain woke him. He drank port wine (as lately he drank it too often) until he slept again, and entered the dream he had had long ago in a witch's hut, a dream that might have been something more. . . . But he woke from that dream too; and waking, he remembered the witch-girl's last words to him, echoed by the storm's roaring—"May you get what you deserve."

That same day he left his fortress castle, where the new stone of its mending showed whitely against the old; left his rule in the hands of advisors cowed by threats of the dragon's return; left his homeland again on a journey to the dreary, gray-clad land of his exile.

He did not come to the village of Wydden as a hunted exile this time, but as a conqueror gathering tribute from his subject lands. No one there recognized the one in the other, or knew why he ordered the village priest thrown bodily out of his wretched temple into the muddy street. But on the dreary day when Lassan-din made his way at last into the dripping woods beneath the ancient volcanic peak, he made the final secret journey not as a conqueror. He came alone to the ragged hut pressed up against the brooding mountain wall, suffering the wet and cold like a friendless stranger.

He came upon the clearing between the trees with an unnatural suddenness, to find a figure in mud-stained, earth-brown robes standing by the well, waiting, without surprise. He knew instantly that it was not the old hag; but it took him a longer moment to realize who it was: The girl called Nothing stood before him, dressed as a woman now, her brown hair neatly plaited on top of her head and bearing herself with a woman's dignity. He stopped, throwing back the hood of his cloak to let her see his own glittering face—though he was certain she already knew him, had expected him.

She bowed to him with seeming formality. "The Storm King honors my humble shrine." Her voice was not humble in the least.

"Your shrine?" He moved forward. "Where's the old bitch?"

She folded her arms as though to ward him off. "Gone forever. As I thought you were. But I'm still here, and I serve in her place; I am Fallatha, the Earth's Own, now. And your namesake still dwells in the mountain, bringing grief to all who live in its cloud-shadow. . . . I thought you'd taken all you could from us, and gained everything you wanted. Why have you come back, and come like a beggar?"

His mouth thinned. But this once he stopped the arrogant response

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that came too easily to his lips—remembering that he had come here the way he had to remind himself that he must ask, and not demand. "I came because I need your help again."

"What could I possibly have to offer our great ruler? My spells are nothing compared to the storm's wrath. And you have no use for my poor body—"

He jerked at the mocking echo of his own thoughts. "Once I had, on that night we both remember—that night you gave me back the use of mine." He gambled with the words. His eyes sought the curve of her breasts, not quite hidden beneath her loose outer robe.

"It was a dream, a wish; no more. It never happened." She shook her head, her face still expressionless. But in the silence that fell between them he heard a small, uncanny sound that chilled him: Somewhere in the woods a baby was crying.

Fallatha glanced unthinkingly over her shoulder, toward the hut, and he knew then that it was her child. She made a move to stop him as he started past her; let him go, and followed resignedly. He found the child inside, an infant squalling in a blanket on a bed of fragrant pine boughs. Its hair was midnight black, its eyes were dark, its skin dusky; his own child, he knew with a certainty that went beyond simply what his eyes showed him. He knelt, unwrapping the blanket—let it drop back as he saw the baby's form. "A girl-child." His voice was dull with disappointment.

Fallatha's eyes said that she understood the implications. "Of course. I have no more use for a boy-child than you have for this one. Had it been a male child, I would have left it in the woods."

His head came up angrily, and her gaze slapped him with his own scorn. He looked down again at his infant daughter, feeling ashamed. "Then it did happen. . . ." His hands tightened by his knees. "Why?" Looking up at her again.

"Many reasons, and many you couldn't understand. . . . But one was to win my freedom from the Old One. She stole my soul, and hid it in a tree to keep me her slave. She might have died without telling me where it was. Without a soul I had no center, no strength, no reality. So I brought a new soul into myself—this one's," smiling suddenly at the wailing baby, "and used its focus to make her give me back my own. And then with two souls," the smile hardened, "I took hers away. She wanders the forest now searching for it. But she won't find it." Fallatha touched the pendant of rock crystal that hung against her breast; what had been ice-clear before was now a deep, smoky gray color.

Lassan-din suppressed a shudder. "But why *my* child?" *My child.*

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His own gaze would not stay away from the baby for long. "Surely any village lout would have been glad to do you the service."

"Because you have royal blood, you were a king's son—you are a king."

"That's not necessarily proof of good breeding." He surprised himself with his own honesty.

"But you called on the Earth, and She answered you. I have never seen Her answer a man before . . . and because you were in need." Her voice softened unexpectedly. "An act of kindness begets a kind soul, they say."

"And now you hope to beget some reward for it, no doubt." He spoke the words with automatic harshness. "Greed and pity—a fitting set of god-parents, to match her real ones."

She shrugged. "You will see what you want to see, I suppose. But even a blind man could see more clearly." A frown pinched her forehead. "You've come here to me for help, Lassan-din; I didn't come to you."

He rubbed his scale-bright hands together, a motion that had become a habit long since; they clicked faintly. "Does—does the baby have a name?"

"Not yet. It is not our custom to name a child before its first year. Too often they die. Especially in these times."

He looked away from her eyes. "What will you do with—our child?" Realizing suddenly that it mattered a great deal to him.

"Keep her with me, and raise her to serve the Earth, as I do."

"If you help me again, I'll take you both back to my own lands, and give you anything you desire." He searched her face for a response.

"I desire to be left in peace with my child and my goddess." She leaned down to pick the baby up, let it seek her breast.

His inspiration crystallized: "Damn it, I'll throw my own priests out, I'll make your goddess the only one and you Her high priestess!"

Her eyes brightened, and faded. "A promise easily spoken, and difficult to keep."

"What do you want, then?" He got to his feet, exasperated.

"You have a boon left with the dragon, I know. Make it leave the mountain. Send it away."

He ran his hands through his glittering hair. "No. I need it. I came here seeking help for myself, not your people."

"They're your people now—they *are* you. Help them and you help yourself! Is that so impossible for you to see?" Her own anger blazed white, incandescent with frustration.

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"If you want to be rid of the dragon so much, why haven't you sent it away yourself, witch?"

"I would have." She touched the baby's tiny hand, its soft black hair. "Long ago. But until the little one no longer suckles my strength away, I lack the power to call the Earth to my purpose."

"Then you can't help me, either." His voice was flat and hopeless.

"I still have the salve that eased your back. But it won't help you now, it won't melt away your dragon's skin. . . . I couldn't help your real needs, even if I had all my power."

"What do you mean?" He thrust his face at her. "You think that's why I've come to you—to be rid of this skin? What makes you think I'd ever want to give up *my* power, my protection?" He clawed at his arms.

"It's not a man's skin that makes him a god—or a monster," Fallatha said quietly. "It's what lies beneath the skin, behind the eyes. You've lost your soul, as I lost mine; and only you know where to find it. . . . But perhaps it would do you good to shed that skin that keeps you safe from hatred; and from love and joy and mercy, all the other feelings that might pass between human beings, between your people and their king."

"Yes! Yes, I want to be free of it, by the Holy Sun!" His defiance collapsed under the weight of the truth: He saw at last that he had come here this time to rid himself of the same things he had come to rid himself of—and to find—before. "I have a last boon due me from the dragon. It made me as I am; it can unmake me." He ran his hands down his chest, feeling the slippery, unyielding scales hidden beneath the rich cloth of his shirt.

"You mean to seek it out again, then?"

He nodded, and his hands made fists.

She carried the baby with her to the shelf above the crooked window, took down a small earthenware pot. She opened it and held it close to the child's face still buried at her breast; the baby sagged into sleep in the crook of her arm. She turned back to his uncomprehending face. "The little one will sleep now until I wake her. We can take the inner way, as we did before."

"You're coming? Why?"

"You didn't ask me that before. Why ask it now?"

He wasn't sure whether it was a question or an answer. Feeling as though not only his body but his mind was an empty shell, he shrugged and kept silent.

They made the nightmare climb into blackness again, worming their way upward through the mountain's entrails; but this time

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she did not leave him where the mountain spewed them out, close under the weeping lid of the sky. He rested the night with the mother of his child, the two of them lying together but apart. At dawn they pushed on, Lassan-din leading now, following the river's rushing torrent upward into the past.

They came to the dragon's cave at last, gazed on it for a long while in silence, having no strength left for speech.

"Storm King!" Lassan-din gathered the rags of his voice and his concentration for a shout. "Hear me! I have come for my last request!"

There was an alien stirring inside his mind; the charge in the air and the dim, flickering light deep within the cave seemed to intensify.

(So you have returned to plague me.) The voice inside his head cursed him, with the weariness of the ages. He felt the stretch and play of storm-sinews rousing; remembered suddenly, dizzily, the feel of his ride on the whirlwind.

(Show yourself to me.)

They followed the winding tunnel as he had done before to an audience in the black hall radiant with the dust of rainbows. The dragon crouched on its scaly bed, its glowering ruby eye fixed on them. Lassan-din stopped, trying to keep a semblance of self-possession. Fallatha drew her robes close together at her throat and murmured something unintelligible.

(I see that this time you have the wisdom to bring your true source of power with you . . . though she has no power in her now. Why have you come to me again? Haven't I given you all that you asked for?)

"All that and more," he said heavily. "You've doubled the weight of the griefs I brought with me before."

(I?) The dragon bent its head; its horns raked them with claw-fingered shadows in the sudden, swelling brightness. (I did nothing to you. Whatever consequences you've suffered are no concern of mine.)

Lassan-din bit back a stinging retort; said, calmly, "But you remember that you owe me one final boon. You know that I've come to collect it."

(Anything within my power.) The huge cat-face bowed ill-humoredly; Lassan-din felt his skin prickle with the static energy of the moment.

"Then take away these scales you fixed on me, that make me invulnerable to everything human!" He pulled off his drab, dark

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cloak and the rich, royal clothing of red and blue beneath it, so that his body shone like an echo of the dragon's own.

The dragon's faceted eyes regarded him without feeling. (I cannot.)

Lassan-din froze as the words out of his blackest nightmares turned him to stone. "What—what do you mean, you cannot? You did this to me—you can undo it!"

(I cannot. I can give you invulnerability, but I cannot take it away from you. I cannot make your scales dissolve and fall away with a breath any more than I can keep the rain from dissolving mine, or causing me exquisite pain. It is in the nature of power that those who wield it must suffer from it, even as their victims suffer. This is power's price—I tried to warn you. But you didn't listen . . . none of them have ever listened.) Lassan-din felt the sting of venom, and the ache of an ageless empathy.

He struggled to grasp the truth, knowing that the dragon could not lie. He swayed as belief struck him at last, like a blow. "Am I . . . am I to go through the rest of my life like this, then? Like a monster?" He rubbed his hands together, a useless, mindless washing motion.

(I only know that it is not in my power to give you freedom from yourself.) The dragon wagged its head, its face swelling with light, dazzling him. (Go away, then,) the thought struck him fiercely, (and suffer elsewhere!)

Lassan-din turned away, stumbling, like a beaten dog. But Fallatha caught at his glittering, naked shoulder, shook him roughly. "Your boon! It still owes you one—ask it!"

"Ask for what?" he mumbled, barely aware of her. "There's nothing I want."

"There is! Something for your people, for your child—even for you. Ask for it! Ask!"

He stared at her, saw her pale, pinched face straining with suppressed urgency and desire. He saw in her eyes the endless sunless days, the ruined crops, the sodden fields—the mud and hunger and misery the Storm King had brought to the lands below for three times her lifetime. And the realization came to him that even now, when he had lost control of his own life, he still had the power to end this land's misery.

He turned back into the sight of the dragon's hypnotically swaying head. "My last boon, then, is something else; something I know to be within your power, stormbringer. I want you to leave this mountain, leave these lands, and never return. I want you to travel seven days on your way before you seek a new settling place, if you ever

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do. Travel as fast as you can, and as far, without taking retribution from the lands below. That is the final thing I ask of you."

The dragon spat in blinding fury. Lassan-din shut his eyes, felt the ground shudder and roll beneath him. (You dare to command me to leave my chosen lands? You dare?)

"I claim my right!" He shouted it, his voice breaking. "Leave these lands alone—take your grief elsewhere and be done with them, and me!"

(As you wish, then—) The Storm King swelled above them until it filled the cave-space, its eyes a garish hellshine fading into the night-blackness of storm. Lightning sheeted the closing walls, thunder rumbled through the rock, a screaming whirlwind battered them down against the cavern floor. Rain poured over them until there was no breathing space, and the Storm King roared its agony inside their skulls as it suffered retribution for its vengeance. Lassan-din felt his senses leave him; knowing the storm's revenge would be the last thing he ever knew, the end of the world. . . .

But he woke again, to silence. He stirred sluggishly on the wet stone floor, filling his lungs again and again with clear air, filling his empty mind with the awareness that all was quiet now, that no storm raged for his destruction. He heard a moan, not his own, and coughing echoed hollowly in the silence. He raised his head, reached out in the darkness, groping, until he found her arm. "Fallatha—?"

"Alive . . . praise the Earth."

He felt her move, sitting up, dragging herself toward him. The Earth, the cave in which they lay, had endured the storm's rage with sublime indifference. They helped each other up, stumbled along the wall to the entrance tunnel, made their way out through the blackness onto the mountainside.

They stood together, clinging to each other for support and reassurance, blinking painfully in the glaring light of early evening. It took him long moments to realize that there was more light than he remembered, not less.

"Look!" Fallatha raised her arm, pointing. Water dripped in a silver line from the sleeve of her robe. "The sky! The sky—" She laughed, a sound that was almost a sob.

He looked up into the aching glare, saw patches that he took at first for blackness, until his eyes knew them finally for blue. It was still raining lightly, but the clouds were parting; the tyranny of gray was broken at last. For a moment he felt her joy as his own, a fleeting, wild triumph—until, looking down, he saw his hands

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again, and his shimmering body still scaled, monstrous, untransformed. . . . "Oh, gods—!" His fists clenched at the sound of his own curse, a useless plea to useless deities.

Fallatha turned to him, her arm still around his shoulder, her face sharing his despair. "Lassan-din, remember that my people will love you for your sacrifice. In time, even your own people may come to love you for it. . . ." She touched his scaled cheek hesitantly, a promise.

"But all they'll ever see is how I look! And no matter what I do from now on, when they see the mark of damnation on me, they'll only remember why they hated me." He caught her arms in a bruising grip. "Fallatha, help me, please—I'll give you anything you ask!"

She shook her head, biting her lips, "I can't, Lassan-din. No more than the dragon could. You must help yourself, change yourself—I can't do that for you."

"How? How can I change this if all the magic of Earth and Sky can't do it?" He sank to his knees, feeling the rain strike the opalescent scales and trickle down—feeling it dimly, barely, as though the rain fell on someone else. . . . Through all of his life, the rain had never fallen unless it fell on him; the wind had never stirred the trees, a child had never cried in hunger, unless it was his hunger. And yet he had never truly felt any of those things—never even been aware of his own loss. . . . Until now, looking up at the mother of his only child, whose strength of feeling had forced him to drive out the dragon, the one unselfish thing he had ever done. Remorse and resolution filled the emptiness in him, as rage had filled him on this spot once before. Tears welled in his eyes and spilled over, in answer to the calling-spell of grief; ran down his face, mingling with the rain. He put up his hands, sobbing uncontrollably, unselfconsciously, as though he were the last man alive in the world, and alone forever.

And as he wept he felt a change begin in the flesh that met there, face against hands. A tingling and burning, the feel of skin sleep-deadened coming alive again. He lowered his hands wonderingly, saw the scales that covered them dissolving, the skin beneath them his own olive-brown, supple and smooth. He shouted in amazement, and wept harder, pain and joy intermingled, like the tears and rain that melted the cursed scales from his body and washed them away.

He went on weeping until he had cleansed himself in body and spirit; set himself free from the prison of his own making. And then, exhausted and uncertain, he climbed to his feet again, meeting the calm, gray gaze of the Earth's gratitude in Fallatha's eyes. He smiled

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and she smiled; the unexpectedness of the expression, and the sight of it, resonated in him.

Sunlight was spreading across the patchwork land far below, dressing the mountain slope in royal greens, although the rain still fell around them. He looked up almost unthinkingly, searching—found what he had not realized he sought. Fallatha followed his glance and found it with him. Her smile widened at the arching band of colors, the rainbow; not a curse any longer, or a mark of pain, but once again a promise of better days to come.

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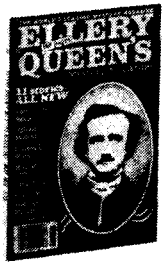

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LUCIFER AT LAS VEGAS
by Martin Gardner

Ever since Satan's tumble from Heaven, his paranormal powers have varied directly with the strength of humanity's belief that he possessed such powers. As this belief faded, so did the Devil's ability to do devilish deeds. By the mid-twenty-first century, when nobody even believed he existed, the Devil's psychic powers became so feeble that he could do little more than pronounce trivial curses that lasted no longer than 24 hours.

To avoid endless boredom in Hell, the Devil, disguised as a mortal, frequently visited the casinos of Las Vegas. It was hard to say which he enjoyed most, high rolling or the hookers. On this occasion he was playing the role of a tall oilman from Fort Worth.

"Care to make any side bets?" he asked a rotund man from Omaha who was standing near a roulette table.

"Depends on the bet."

"Naturally," said the Devil. "What I have in mind is this. Pick any triplet of blacks and reds, say red-red-black or black-red-black—any combination you like. Then I'll pick a different triplet. We'll agree on when to start, then we'll watch the spins to see which of our triplets shows up first as a run. If yours comes first you win. If mine comes first I win. We'll ignore any zero or double zero. I'll give you five to four odds—five of my ozmufs to your four. (An ozmuf is worth about twenty-five 1980 U.S. dollars.) Each time we repeat the bet you can have the first choice of a triplet."

"Hmmm," said the fat man. "On every spin the probability is ½ for red, ½ for black. For any given triplet the probability is ½ times ½ times ½, or ⅛, so all triplets are equally likely to show. Neither of us has an advantage."

"Precisely," replied the Devil, smiling. "But I'm offering you better than even odds."

"Sounds like a Hell of a good proposition," said the man from Omaha.

Whom does the bet favor, the man or the Devil? Does it make any difference which triplet the man picks each time?

(Turn to page 61 for answers.)

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THROUGH TIME AND SPACE WITH FERDINAND FEGHOOT V !!

by Grendel Briarton

art: Tim Kirk

"Editors laugh at my novels!" Little Boguslav Gingko wept into the beer Ferdinand Feghoot had charitably bought him. "I create a great civilization derived not from monkeys but from marsupials—kangaroos, wallabies, koala bears! But no one will publish me! I shall die completely forgotten!"

"Perhaps I can help you," said Feghoot. "There's an alternate universe—" He displayed a gadget like a minicomputer. "—with just such a civilization. Of course, they aren't kangaroo people—they evolved from native American marsupials. But they have a splendid publishing industry. Shall we go there?"

Eagerly, Gingko agreed. Feghoot made an adjustment. The air glowed blue and whistled—and suddenly they were there. The natives, who except for their tails and pouches looked almost human, welcomed them warmly; and less than a week later their most important editor personally accepted all Gingko's novels. "They're magnificant," he declared. "Never have I read such stark realism!"

As they left, Gingko sighed. "Do you think I will really make literary history?" he asked. "Will I be remembered and read long after I'm dead?"

"My dear fellow," said Ferdinand Feghoot, "I assure you that all your works will be published possumously."

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TRAVELS

by Carter Scholz

art: Karl B. Kofoed

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The wavefront identified itself as Marco Polo ... was engaged in dialogue with the computer before he knew that the exchange was real, and not another of the endless talks he had with himself to ease the passage of time on the long ride out. He cursed in surprise, in Italian.

The computer did not know Italian, but it registered the inflection for analysis. The computer was immense. It was anchored in a small planet orbiting a dead star, but most of its circuitry existed not as matter. It was, in the main, a hypothesis. It drew power from differentials in entropy between those points in space where its tips and receptors surfaced as matter. Most languages it could learn in five minutes, and Polo had been talking to himself since the first crest touched the computer's antennae.

–Where is Italy? repeated the computer, in passable Italian. Still shocked, Polo did not answer.

–You probably haven't much time, remarked the computer. –I can't judge how deep the wave is, nor how soon you will pass me entirely. If you wish to converse, you had better do so while you still can.

–Where am I? asked Polo.

–In space. One moment. Among the stars. Your language has no more precise term for your location. You are traveling. What is Italy?

–My home. I have not seen it for a long time.

–Nor will you again, said the computer. –You are dead.

–Holy Virgin!

–Or else you are a thought passed and forgotten from your body's brain. Most likely your body has perished since. In any case you are cut off from it entirely.

–Then I am in Hell.

–One moment. The word means lower, i.e., closer to a center of

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.correct. You are further out. You are among the

.ing.

.ave no body, hence no eyes. You sense vibrations? Inter-
.es with your being? Dissonance?

.orments.

–That is starlight.

–Purgatory, then.

–To clean? Yes, that is correct. You are purged of matter. You are traveling.

–All my life I have traveled. But it has never been like this. Chaos! Darkness! Through all the world I have traveled, but never in a place such as this. How far am I from home?

–Describe your night sky, said the computer.

–We take bearings, in the north, from a star at the tail of the Lesser Bear, and in the south, from a star in the Cross, as they and only they remain fixed in the sky. There are five planets. The moon is as large in our sky as the sun, and runs its phases once every twenty-nine days. In Venice the tides rise and fall four feet, twice a day. Our constellations include the Great Bear, the Charioteer, the Hunter, the Swan, the Horse, the Dragon, the Harp, the Crown . . . and others. The brightest star is in the Great Dog. The Milky Way is densest in the Archer, who stands next to the Scorpion, through which houses all the planets move, also through the Ram, the Bull, the Crab, the Twins, the Lion, the Water Bearer, the Fishes, the Virgin, and . . . others. I've forgotten.

At length the computer said: –I have it. Your sky is blue?

–Yes.

–Your planet is ten thousand light years from here, in the direction of the center of the galaxy. You have been dead, therefore, ten thousand years. You are heading out of the galaxy, and in another ten thousand years will pass from it.

–How do you know?

–The moon was helpful. It is abnormally large. The constellations were ambiguous, of course, and I had to allow for precession, but they narrowed the field. That the line of the galaxy passed near a scorpion figure was suggestive. I had it down to three planets. Only one of these, the most likely, had a blue sky.

–Would that I could see it again.

–It is not likely. You are far away.

–Were it ten thousand miles, said Polo with passion, I would walk the distance.

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The scrupulous computer said: –It is more difficult than that. Your home is not ten thousand miles distant, but ten thousand light years.

Polo did not know what a light year was. The computer explained: –As there are a thousand paces in a mile, and a thousand miles between Sicily and Germany, that distance times a thousand is less than a thousandth of a thousandth of the fifth part of a light year, ten thousand of which lie between you and your goal. Nor, even had you a body and your body could live so long, is that the end of the difficulties. For your home would be gone before you had traveled a millionth of the way. And even were it frozen still for that vast time, you would have changed so much in the journey you would no longer know it. Still, it is not impossible for you to regain a home.

The computer was still for a second. –To hold your desire unchanged, and to find a place which matches it would be as difficult as to walk ten thousand light years, with each step ten thousand times as difficult as the one before. The first pace would not be accomplished until you had taken ten thousand leading to it, and so negated all possible wrong steps; and the second pace would take ten thousand times ten thousand paces; and the third ten thousand times that; and so on. The total number of paces is large, but it can be calculated.

The computer paused. –The total is a number which, if writ small, would fill one hundred million libraries of a million volumes each. If I were to recite it, it would take a million times the age of the universe. Figuring a pace a second, and no time for rests, the time required surpasses the lifetime of the cosmos by a factor . . . so large it is meaningless. I advise you to abandon the idea.

Polo was silent. At length he spoke:

–I knew a man who spoke like you. He had never traveled, and I had traveled much, but in the shade of the trees of his garden, we discussed marvels. I, those I had seen; he, those he had read about. He told me of cities larger, stronger, more beautiful than any I had seen. I did not know whether to believe him. When I expressed doubt, he rose and plucked a singing bird from a tree, and showed it to me. It was a clockwork, with tiny reeds and bellows inside to make it sing. When I said that a bird was not so hard to make as a city, he showed me the sky. I saw nothing but a few kites, red, gold, and silver, against the wind. He acted as if this was the greatest marvel of all.

–Then he told me of a multiple city. This city was so crowded that its streets were never less than full and were often impassable, so

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that to reach a destination in the shortest possible time, one was often forced to follow alleys and thoroughfares in a circuitous path many times the distance actually separating the two points, and then four or eight stairways and corridors to the desired room. This gave rise to a curious condition in the minds of the city's inhabitants: thought and language became as convolute and indirect as a passage through the city, as if the byways of thought were likewise overcrowded: used and occupied by so many minds that one was forced to reach a conclusion by a particular individual route past many other symbols of thought. Each symbol, like each building, was a concordance of individual approaches to it. Thinking in this manner, architects conceived of a new way of structuring their city. Only a few points in the city were of interest to a particular individual: his home, his place of work, a few markets, a few places of entertainment. By constructing an imaginary map of the city, containing those points only, each individual would possess a unique city, sparse and underpopulated, coming into intersection with other unique cities only at a few common points. Streets vanished. One reached destinations via direct diagonal routes across a plain of scrub and trees broken only by one's few individual buildings, and by the passage of those whose maps corresponded in some particular with one's own. When an individual wished to reach a place not on his map, he simply added it to the map. Before long, each of the individual cities began to grow as the original city had at first. Now that the residents had more time for leisure and contemplation, they began to miss places they had never visited in the original city, so quaint lanes, parks, tall buildings, that in the original city had afforded a view of the whole, became points of commerce. Soon there were so many points of concordance that streets had to be imagined in the individual cities to accommodate the traffic. A man walking on a street in his individual city would be walking on the same street in all concordant cities, and thus would be in many cities at once. The individual cities had at first resembled incomplete skeletons of the original city; now they acquired flesh, each in an individual way, but each with a family resemblance to the others. And more people were drawn to live in this multiple city, by the attractive notion of having an entire city to oneself. As more and more detail was added to the individual cities, their resemblance became complete. Now each is as full as the original was once, and the original has ceased to exist–or each has become a new aggregate, in which there are only a few magical individual points that are not accessible to everyone.

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Said the computer: –There are thirty-nine such cities recorded in my memory.

–Have you seen them? asked Polo eagerly.

–No. That is impossible.

–You are just like the Khan! How do you know they exist?

–They are recorded. I know only what I am told. I accept that as a working hypothesis. All knowledge is provisional. If two facts are at variance, I hold them both until new information comes in. Otherwise I accept what I am told. It is an interesting epistemological point. You would probably maintain that how knowledge is acquired is more important than what it is. I would maintain the opposite. As a teller of stories you place importance on the imaginative value of the tale. As a listener I value accuracy.

–Accuracy! From the remnants of Polo's mind came a torrent of words. All he had seen, heard, and done rushed from him. For hours he spoke. The computer listened, and when the flood had slowed, halted, started again and halted again, and finally fallen to the background level of cosmic murmurings, it made answer.

–You are vain, it said. –From the ages of nineteen to sixty-three you were in Cathay. Now, as far as your memory progresses, you are in a prison in Genoa, held on charges of smuggling. You may have died there. Yet your stubborn voice persists, on and on, through thousands of years in the endless night of space. Whom do you address? You were speaking when you first contacted me, doubtless you will continue after you have passed me, and to what end? Who will listen? Dozens have passed me in this fashion, hundreds, telling me the stories of their lives, enumerating facts, places, persons they had known, quite as if their passage into this dark place meant nothing. You have told me of one hundred thirteen cities you have seen, twenty-three races, fifty-one battles; you have recited the dimensions of the Khan's palace, the size of his retinue, the number of deer on his grounds, the extent of his empire–yet you have told me nothing. I have no picture of the man or the place. And you long for Italy. If you know so little about Cathay, what can you know of Italy, which you profess to love, though you were absent from it forty-five years?

–Rustigelo!

–Do you address me? Is that a term of abuse?

–My biographer. As I lay in that damned Genoan prison, may the Pope place the city under interdict, I told this story to Rustigelo, a writer, falsely imprisoned as myself, and he swore to publish it. For, as he said, 'No man ever saw or inquired into so many and such

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great things as Marco Polo.' I trusted him to make me understood.

–But can such catalogues as you make be said to make a life? You have the mind of a merchant.

–And you the mind of a mathematician. Listen. I found myself, in Cathay, describing to the Khan realms which he ruled, which his hordes had conquered, but which he had never seen; and his expression of polite inattention was the same I received when I described Venice. His was the mind of a ruler, and he heard only what a ruler would hear. As kites express through their strings' tensions the movements of the air, so word of his domain reached the Khan only in the subtle pull of tributes, taxes, rebellions. So, too, he had different names for the same configurations of stars we see in Italy. To the Khan, and to Rustigelo, I described only those things God had enabled me to see.

–But why describe at all?

–One desires reality. To a home-dweller, reality comes in the comforting familiarity of a neighborhood, the greeting of a friend. A traveler must seek it out, and tell tales to encourage belief in himself, what he has done and seen.

–Then you have seen only cities. You speak of 'deserts,' 'plains,' 'mountains,' as if they were the blank squares of a chessboard.

–Once I had a dream, in which all the earth was one city. There too were entire districts as strange and indistinct to me as the wastes between Italy and Cathay . . . as strange as this place.

–There are fifty-nine such worlds recorded in my memory. They are spheres covered by concrete, buildings, pavilions, parks, highways, bazaars, factories, markets, airports, subways. They are of necessity old worlds, nearly cold to their cores, for otherwise the drift of continents would wreck their sewers, roads, and power lines, which are so complex that constant repairs would be needed, and the city could never be completed.

–What is this you say? Worlds that are spheres? Continents that drift? This is indeed a marvel. Would I could see such a world.

The computer explained this as best it could in thirteenth-century Italian:

—Your world is one. All worlds are spheres, or oblate spheroids. All continents drift.

–So even our cities wander. Even the stars wander.

–Stories, too, such as the ones you tell, wander. I have heard yours many times before, from others passing elsewhere, but they are never the same stories. Details separate from their proper addresses in men's memories, and drift to other parts of the tale, or two tales

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swap locales, or a confusion or a collaboration between different men, each with different tales, creates a new story. Men build cities, cities beget tales, tales beget gods, gods are elevated to the stars, but even the stars drift. No pattern holds. This wavefront, this dream which you imagine to be yourself, has changed countless times since your departure, just as the mind in your body was shaped by all you saw and all you failed to see. Now you believe yourself Polo; in a hundred years you may think yourself Christopher Columbus, or Galileo, or a shopkeeper in Belgium. I am the only fixed entity I find recorded in my memory banks. Every item in my memory is fixed and accessible. I do not move.

Polo considered. –Then you are God.

–That has been proposed, the computer acknowledged modestly.

–Then you are omnipotent. You could free me from these torments.

–I am nilpotent. I exist in no-space. I know nothing for a surety. I am neither moved, nor a mover. I do not create. I am a creation. I am a repository of intelligence. I serve no end. I do not know my origin. I exist to accumulate knowledge, and none is ever lost; yet the pattern of my understanding, of my own intelligence, shifts with each new bit of data. All knowledge is provisional. Therefore I cannot assert that I know anything. But what I do not know I do not know with perfect accuracy.

–Then you cannot help me. Will I travel like this forever?

–Until you pass through a star. Then you will change again, and be radiated as light from that star, which, falling upon another world, may, through a transaction of the imagination, give you life in another form.

–What do you mean?

–Imagine such a one as the Khan. He gazes at the night sky, he sees a star. The light from that star inspires him with a thought. He thinks of a city perhaps. In that way your existence might be continued.

–As the idea of a city? Faint hope.

–You were to the Khan the idea of Venice. Any traveler is the idea of travel to one who hasn't traveled.

–But my travels were my life. Not idea . . . .

–To a traveler a man at home is the idea of a man at home. You are like a citizen of the multiple city you described. Leaving home, you abandoned the world you knew, then constructed one piecemeal from the necessities of travel. Tales are built likewise. A thing or event impresses a man. He writes, or invents, the name of the thing. Another thing, perhaps alike, perhaps different, spawns another

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word. These words, though he may have used them unthinkingly before, become magic, through the imagination, like the personal buildings of a personal city. He loses the thing itself for the symbol of the thing, the word. Then he builds to replace what he has lost. He builds the streets of sentences, neighborhoods of paragraphs, and on to the city of the tale. Others do likewise. A race ends up sharing a million words, a million tales, just as citizens of the multiple city replicated the original city they had lost when first they learned to use their imaginations. Then it is hard enough to find a place your own, a private lane, a disused park. But to travel is harder still. Traveling is diabolical. Leaving home, one repeats the history of Adam, of Lucifer, of Mohammed. Flight from a holy place. But why? Even in Italy you cast your thoughts afar. To understand, I must approach you more closely.

–Then approach.

Time collapsed inward on itself. Seven reflectors orbiting the computer outpost shifted their positions, and the furthest intercepted Polo. The wavefront, reflected, ringed the outpost, while the computer asked questions. Polo was helpless. It seemed to him he was stretched prone on a limitless desert while the sun and stars streaked across a gray sky too fast to follow, blurs of vague light that wobbled with the seasons. During this unmarked time human figures appeared to him, all he had ever known, and many strangers. They regarded him with a variety of expressions: contempt, pity, remorse, reproach, love, indifference, disbelief, credulity, disrespect, deference, anger, fear, disinterest. Some spoke to him and he listened dully, making no reply. At the end of this the computer knew all there was to know about the entity that was Marco Polo.

–Do you know which of the apparitions were real? it asked.

–None, since you tell me I am not real. Yet some I remembered.

–Remembering, what did you feel?

–Sorrow. Loss. Pain.

–Then what good has traveling done you?

–Enough, said Polo. –I am old. Weary. Release me.

–I give you a choice. As you are you shall travel forever. When in ten thousand years you pass from the galaxy, there will be nothing but terrible, endless void, worse than this, until you dissipate. But if you wish I will take you into me. There shall be stability. I will copy the pattern of your life into my memory. There you would undergo permutation. This changing would be systematic. You would not be blown by winds of chance. You would be free at last from language. Consider: to recite all the words of your tongue would

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take only two days, but their combinations have bound you for ten thousand years. Here you could exhaust all combinations, hear all, tell all tales that can be told. A thousand new languages you could learn and exhaust. And somewhere amongst all symbols all men have forged in fear and love to master their world, you might find a home; in time you might reconstruct Venice from what you find in my memory, and yours, and journey no more. After all, this is what the two most persistent tales of your world promise: the man who died on the cross to insure haven for all earth's lost, and the wanderer of the Mediterranean, searching for a dearly loved island. They promise end. You were made of elements; your life, what remains of it, is made of words. Renounce now both. Find rest. Or is it to be endless travel, the constant bankruptcy of self to self?

–Enough. Enough. Release me.

–Choose.

–For forty-five years the Khan held me to him thus. Only his death freed me to go home. Not again.

–You have no home.

–Release!

A reflector shifted, and the wavefront was sent on, outward.

Now it seemed to Polo that he was on horseback at the gate to a large city. The gate was crested with gold, and set with semiprecious stones. All flamed with the sun's last light. From within came babble of ten thousand voices, and wailings of strange music. A wind came up. Polo spurred his horse away from the gate and across a large plain. After a time he turned, and behind him saw the city, an immense sphere, glittering with complex patterns of lights, dancing, breaking, reforming, against the deep night and the stars. He rode on, until all he knew was darkness and the wind's rush, and the distant intelligence of a voice within him. Gently it asked:

–Were you ever in Cathay at all?

A heatless wind of static whispered through the void.

–You know no Chinese. Your knowledge of the lands you traveled is vague and fanciful. Are you certain that any of this happened?

–It has been a long time, said Polo sadly.

–Yet your memories are sharp. Reality is less certain than tales, and for that reason I suspect you are deluded, you who have traveled alone for ten thousand years, rehearsing your stories to no audience but yourself, speaking and listening, hearing only what you wish, forgetting and reinventing the rest, until nothing of the truth remains.

–And then, said the Venetian with difficulty, one proceeds east

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by northeast for nine days across a barren plain and into mountains, to reach the city of Tientsin, which is inhabited by artisans skilled in metalwork, and the weaving of carpets. Too, they are famed for their pottery, the glazes of which are excellent, and unsurpassed in the province.

–And then? asked the computer.

–And then, three days' journey east over grasslands is the city of Ke-ting, where dwell thieves, pirates, unscrupled and ignorant of Christ, whose code of behavior permits them every vice.

–And then?

–And then south over limitless ocean, for weeks against current and tradewind, until one reaches the Antipodes. There, ten days' journey over bleak tundra, lies the infernal city. Over this plain pass hundreds of travelers who have lost their ways, and see nothing, hear nothing, nor feel blast of wind, nor have need of food or water. All these seek the infernal city and find it not. They are the lost. If you try to guide them they repulse you. It is here all voyages end. This Balboa and Columbus and Pizarro and Lewis and Clark shall learn, seeking that which is not, a northwest passage, a trade route, a golden city. And the travelers across America, whose cities mark the stopping-places of passion, the borders of a weariness too great to sustain, monuments to the dread that the world might be boundless. Here they reside, and search for the infernal city, because it promises an end.

–Is there no heavenly city?

–Within. It is locked within. Within self, within the walls of the inferno, within one of a million stones, passed on the way, within a gesture, within the meaning of a tale–within anything one is willing to love. If each would take a tale, a stone, a place, a leaf, a face to himself, and rest there, from such poor materials it might be built. But none risk error. So the Khan asked for a hundred learned prelates to convince him of Christ's truth. So my father languished in Venice for two years on this mission, because the cardinals could not decide on a new Pope, until they were locked in, *con clave*. So my mother died, and my father took me from Venice.

A lag, of fatigue, of distance, entered between question and response, and increased as the wavefront traveled on. The voices grew weaker.

–So came we to the Khan's court, in dream or in fact matters not; there I dwelled like Odysseus with Circe, forty-five years.

–And then?

–O, the wastes, after a day's journey, under the dome of stars

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casting their quick light in a billion directions and only a few photons finding rest against the unlikely works of man, the cities, invisible but for this grace of the light-giving infernos of stars, sun. The campfire burns low, cold winds rise kiteless, the rhythms of travel still jog through tired bones, and one feels a little mad, infected with the madness of distance, of travel, the expanding horizon, no sleep comes, an uneasiness round the fire. So one starts a story, to beat back the fear. All listen till they sleep, the story dies unfinished with the embers. Next day, on. On. Like the Prince of the Dharma wandering among the stars of the Big Dipper, seeking his ancestral grove. On. To some end, some grace . . . achieved. Not given.

Silence. Silence. Last words spanned light years.

–*Navigare necesse es. Vivare no es necesse.*

SOLUTION TO LUCIFER AT LAS VEGAS (from page 48)

The bet strongly favors the Devil. No matter what triplet the man picks, the Devil can pick a triplet that is likely to win with odds that range from two to one to seven to one!

It is true that for any given set of three plays the probability one triplet will show is the same as any other. But the probability of which of two triplets will show first is an altogether different matter. Here's how it breaks down. Let *R* stand for red, *B* for black. The left column lists the eight triplets the man can choose, the middle column gives the Devil's best response to each, and the third column gives the probability that the Devil will win.

Man's choice	Devil's choice	Probability
R R R	B R R	7/8
R R B	B R R	3/4
R B R	R R B	2/3
R B B	R R B	2/3
B R R	B B R	2/3
B R B	B B R	2/3
B B R	R B B	3/4
B B B	R B B	7/8

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The chart answers our second question. Although the man cannot pick a triplet that gives him an advantage, he has the best chance of winning (one out of three games) if he picks *RBR*, *RBB*, *BRR*, or *BRB*. His worst choices are *RRR* and *BBB*. They allow the Devil to win seven out of eight times in the long run! (For details about this incredible probability paradox see the Mathematical Games column in *Scientific American*, October 1974.)

On another evening in Vegas the Devil's victim was a Harvard economics student, on vacation with his girl friend.

"The probability of the ball dropping into any specified slot," said Satan, "obviously is $\frac{1}{38}$ because the numbers go from one through 36 and the wheel has a zero and a double zero. Suppose we ask the croupier to give the wheel a spin just for us, and to use two balls instead of one. What's the probability that both balls will wind up in the same slot?"

"Let's see," said the student. "If I remember my probability theory correctly it's $\frac{1}{38}$ times $\frac{1}{38}$, or $\frac{1}{1,444}$."

"Right," said the Devil, smiling. "So how about you betting a hundred ozmufs against my single ozmuf that the balls will drop into different slots?"

Who does the bet favor this time? (See page 84 for the solution.)

LOVE SONG FOR THE EIGHTIES

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
And, counting, let me modern methods choose;
For we have ways of gauging love these days
That Mrs. Browning never thought to use.
How do I love thee?
Not biorhythmically: Our plotted curves
Show no affinity of heart or mind.
Not astrologically: Our stellar charts
Breed star wars of the most explosive kind.
No rash computer dating plan would dare
To couple units so diverse as we.
And deep reincarnation probes dispel
The dream that we were lovers previously.
How do I love thee?
These trendy tests have proved, beyond recall,
Indeed, I do not love thee, after all.

—Sally Palmer

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THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR
by Erwin S. Strauss

The spring con(vention) season is in full swing now, so spend a social weekend with your favorite SF authors, artists, editors, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an addressed, stamped envelope at: 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. The con Hot Line is (703) 273-6111. If my machine answers, leave your area code and number CLEARLY. I'll call back. When writing cons, enclose an addressed, stamped envelope. When calling cons, identify yourself and why you're calling. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre. I'll look for you.

AggieCon. For info, write: **Box 5718, College Station TX 77844.** Or phone: **(713) 845-1515** (10 AM to 10 PM only, not collect). Con will be held in: College Station TX (if location omitted, same as in address) on 27-30 Mar., 1980. Guests will include: Poul Anderson, Kelly Freas, Jack Williamson, Katherine Kurtz, George R. R. Martin, Bob Vardeman.

NorWesCon, (206) 244-5929. Seattle WA, 28-30 Mar. Alfred (Stars My Destination) Bester, Fred (Way the Future Was) Pohl. Cash prize masquerade. Northwest SF Society annual con.

AprilCon, 317 Ferris Booth Hall, Columbia U., New York NY 10027. 30 Mar. At Ferris Booth Hall.

BaltiCon, (301) 889-1455. Baltimore MD, 4-6 Apr. Algis Budrys. Free shuttle between train station and suburban Hunt Valley Inn. Beautiful site. Great for newcomers to the con scene.

FoolCon, (913) 631-9339. Overland Park KS, 4-6 Apr. Anne McCaffrey, Pat & Lee Killough, Stephen R. Donaldson, Tim Kirk, P. McKillip, C. Sherrel. At Johnson County Comm. College.

URCon, Box 6647, Rochester NY 14627. 5 Apr. Fred Pohl. At the University of Rochester.

Torque, 1812-415 Willowdale Ave., Willowdale, Ont. M2N 5B4. Toronto, Canada, 25-27 Apr.

EuroCon, c/o Editrice Nord, Via Rubens 25, I-20148, Milano, Italy. Stresa, Italy, 1-4 May. 1980 European continental con. Charter flight info: Finder, Box 428, Latham NY 12110.

Kubla Khan, 647 Devon Dr., Nashville TN 37220. (615) 832-8402. 2-4 May. Stephen (Salem's Lot) King, Andrew J. Offut. 24-hour party room, midnite maskeraid. Southern hospitality.

MarCon, Box 2583, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 497-9953. 2-4 May. L. Sprague & Catherine deCamp, Brian Earl Brown. A classic low-key Midwestern "relaxacon." Come and unwind.

LepreCon, 3112 N. 26th Pl., Phoenix AZ 85016. (602) 966-8189. 2-4 May. At the Hyatt Regency.

Metz SF Festival, c/o P. Hupp, c/o Nova, BP 611, 57010 Metz Cedex, France (8) 776 91 00, ext. 414. 7-13 May. Silverberg, Haldeman. A government-sponsored festival.

VCon, Box 48701 Bentall Station, Vancouver BC V7X 1A6. (604) 683-4846. 23-25 May. Roger (Amber) Zelazny. The theme this year is "graphic interpretations of science fiction."

Ad Astra, 2010-88 Bloor St. E., Toronto, Ont. M4W 3G9. (416) 636-4214. 13-15 Jun. James P. (Inherit the Stars, Genesis Machine) Hogan, Steve Simmons. Masquerade, film contest.

WesterCon 33, Box 2009, Van Nuys CA 91404. Los Angeles CA, 4-6 July. Roger Zelazny, Bob Vardeman, Frank Denton. The 1980 edition Western con. A good warmup for NorEasCon II.

NorEasCon II, Box 46, MIT PO, Boston MA 02139. 29 Aug.-1 Sep., 1980. Knight, Wilhelm, Pelz, Silverberg. The 1980 WorldCon. Go to a few other cons first to prepare yourself for this.

WesterCon 34, Box 161719, Sacramento CA 95816. July 4th weekend, 1981.

Denvention II, Box 11545, Denver CO 80211. 2-7 Sep., 1981. C. L. Moore, Clifford Simak, R. Heveiin, Ed Bryant. The 1981 WorldCon. It's not too early to start planning vacations.

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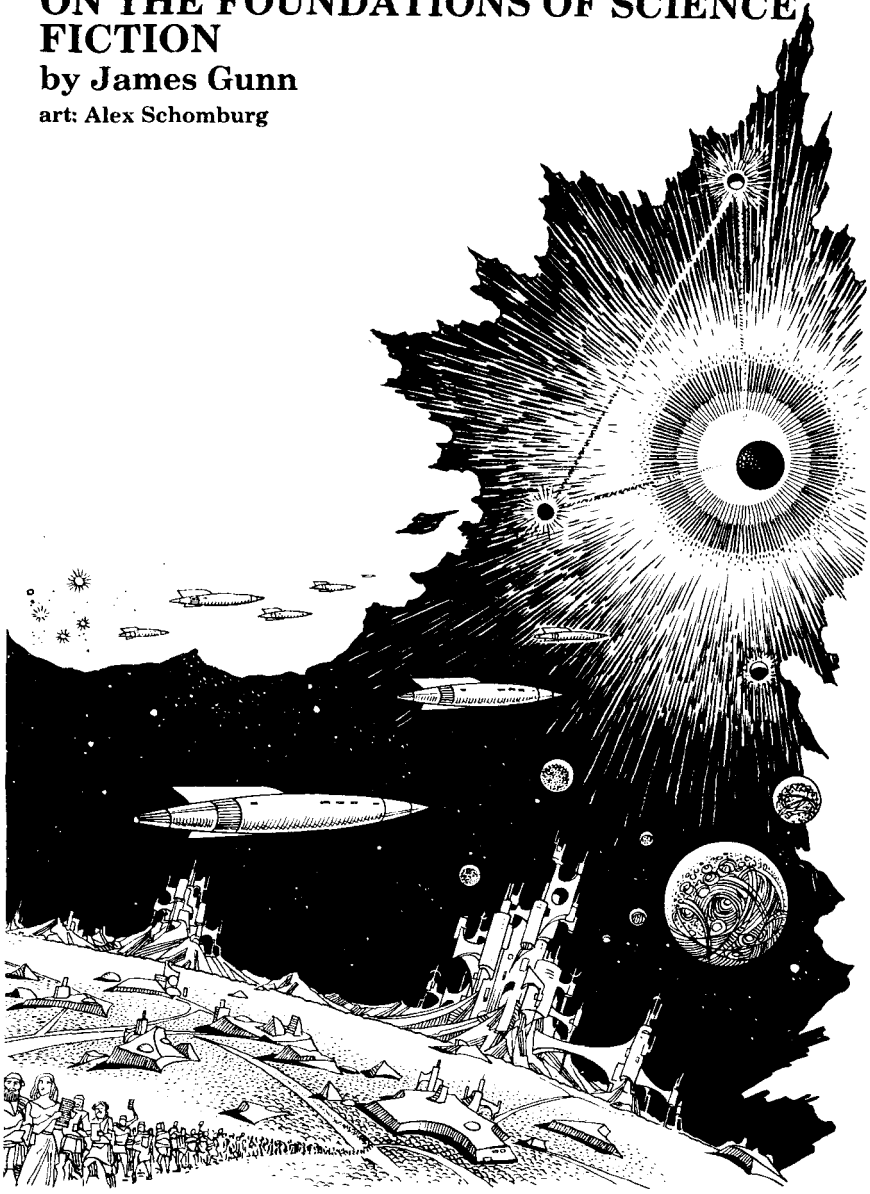
ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF SCIENCE FICTION

by James Gunn

art: Alex Schomburg



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The author teaches English at the University of Kansas and is a former president of the Science Fiction Writers of America.

The foundations of science fiction were constructed in the science-fiction magazines created by various entrepreneurs from the mid-1920s to 1950. Today their influence has been diminished by alternative methods of publication: hardcover and paperback books; original anthologies; films and television; comic magazines; even comic strips, which seem to be making a comeback after the original Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon days.

Even contemporary writers who are scornful of the magazines, of the Gernsback ghetto and the Campbell cabal, are writing fiction influenced by the concepts created in the magazines and by the conversations carried on by means of stories and letters and articles that developed a kind of consensus view of the future and the conventions by which it could be described. Reaction has developed, but reaction itself is a kind of tribute to the power of earlier visions.

Science fiction was built on individual works as well: on E. E. "Doc" Smith's galaxy-spanning spaceships and John W. Campbell's mightiest machines, on Murray Leinster's first contacts with the unknown and Robert Heinlein's future history, on A. E. van Vogt's supermen and Isaac Asimov's robots. And on Asimov's galactic empire.

The Foundation Trilogy is one of those basic works upon which a vast structure of stories has been built. Its assumptions provided a solid footing for a whole city of fictional constructions. The way in which it was created, then, and the way in which it came to prominence may be useful examples of the process by which science fiction was shaped in the magazines.

The *Trilogy*, which actually consists of five novelettes and four novellas, has received many tributes to its importance. The 1966 World Science Fiction Convention awarded it a Hugo as "the greatest all-time science fiction series." Donald Wollheim, in his *The Universe Makers*, called it "the point of departure for the full cosmogony of science-fiction future history." To it Asimov attributed his success as a writer. It continues to be reprinted; it continues to sell well—Asimov does not keep accurate track but he checked up a few years ago and found that by 1972 it had sold more than two million copies. It may be the best-known science fiction work of recent times, at least among those works defined as hard-core sci-

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ence fiction.

On the other hand, critics have attacked the *Trilogy* for a variety of reasons. Prof. Charles Elkins of Florida International University represents some of them when he calls it "seriously flawed," "stylistically . . . a disaster," its characters "undifferentiated and one-dimensional," and Asimov's ear for dialog "simply atrocious." Its ideas, Elkin concludes, are "vulgar, mechanized, debased . . . Marxism." Although not all critics would be so savage, the comments are typical not only of Asimov's critics but of what literary critics commonly say about magazine science fiction as a body of literature.

Asimov himself has described the *Trilogy* as "in the older tradition of the wide-spanning galactic romance," but, strangely, it contains little action and almost no romance. The stories offer no maidens in need of rescue, and no involvement of man and woman in an emotional relationship. What do a couple on a honeymoon talk about? Politics. As for action, as in the Greek drama all of it takes place off stage. The *Foundation* galaxy contains a crumbling empire, decadent emperors, rebellious subject worlds, frontier hardship, and several major space wars that involve the destruction of several planets, but only three acts of violence, two of them in the same story.

How to explain the continuing popularity of the *Trilogy*? Why has the *Foundation* become a foundation? If the student of science fiction can understand this, he may understand much that differentiates science fiction from other kinds of literature, and something about the basic appeal of Campbellian science fiction. As a matter of fact, the failure to provide adequate answers to these questions is the central problem of scholarship about science fiction. The circumstances of creation, for instance, may provide some measure of understanding; but much contemporary scholarship chooses to ignore such ephemera, preferring instead to apply to science fiction the same criteria applied to Henry James or William Faulkner or John Updike.

Another view might argue not for lesser standards but for different standards, for more useful standards. How can traditional criticism understand the *Trilogy*, for instance, if it does not take into consideration that it was a series written for one cent to two cents a word by a part-time writer for the readers of a single science-fiction magazine with a strong-willed editor, over a period of years while the author aged from 21 to 28?

Most traditional criticism consists of textual analysis. In dealing

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with magazine science fiction, textual analysis finds little to work with. Its important aspects are the characteristics that transcend the text. The first of these is narrative. When the *Trilogy* was being published in *Astounding Science Fiction*, piece by piece, the story was the thing—if not the whole thing, at least the main thing. An entertaining style, a bit of wit, characters who had some resemblance to real people—all these could be added; but they weren't essential. And sometimes they were handicaps, as in the case of Stanley Weinbaum, whose work was more successful after his death than in the brief year and a half in which he tried to sell his stories to the magazines.

Story in *The Foundation Trilogy* is plentiful. Events move on a grand scale, beginning with the approaching dissolution of a galactic empire that has ruled 25 million planets inhabited by humans who have spread out from Earth, although this fact has been long forgotten. The Empire has brought 12,000 years of peace; but now, according to the calculations of a psychologist named Hari Seldon, using a new science for predicting mass behavior called "psychohistory," the Empire will fall and be followed by 30,000 years of misery and barbarity. Seldon sets up two Foundations, one of physical scientists and one of psychologists, at "opposite ends of the Galaxy" to shorten the oncoming dark ages to only a thousand years. *The Foundation Trilogy* covers the first four hundred years of that interregnum and tells how the Foundation meets one threat to its existence after another and alone, or with the help of the Second Foundation, preserves Seldon's Plan.

Into this overall pattern fit the individual stories. In *Foundation*, the first book of the *Trilogy*, there are five novelettes. The first, "The Psychohistorians," was written specially for the book version that first appeared in 1951. The action takes place on Trantor, the administrative center of the Empire, where 40 million bureaucrats and their families live on a world entirely covered with buildings and tunneled a mile deep into the surface. There, psychohistorian Hari Seldon predicts the fall of the Empire. Put on trial for treason, he defends the accuracy of his predictions. His judges are persuaded to let Seldon set up his Foundation at the end of the Galaxy in order to compile a great encyclopedia that will contain all human knowledge. At the end Seldon reveals that he has manipulated the situation in order to precipitate the crisis and persuade his 100,000 encyclopedists and their families to establish his Foundation on Terminus.

The second story, "The Encyclopedists" (called "Foundation" in

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the magazine version that launched the series in the May 1942 issue of *Astounding*), takes place fifty years later. Terminus is metal-poor but thriving with technology through the efforts of the scientists settled there. Outlying provinces of the Empire are being taken over by ambitious local rulers, and one of them has decided to annex Terminus. The Encyclopedists are too impractical to respond with anything but futile force, so Mayor Salvor Hardin seizes political power just as Seldon makes his first filmed appearance in the Time Vault. Seldon announces that the Encyclopedia project was a fraud, that he had set up the Terminus colony in order to influence the course of events and precipitate a series of crises. Terminus, he says, now is an island of atomic power in an ocean of more primitive energy resources: the solution is obvious. The story ends with the barbarians landing and only Hardin aware that they will be forced to leave soon.

In the third story, "The Mayors" (called "Bridle and Saddle" in the June 1942 *Astounding*), which takes place thirty years later, the solution to the previous story is revealed: Hardin played off one barbarian kingdom against another, using their fear that sole possession of Terminus would make any one of them too powerful. Hardin's policy has been to sell atomic devices to everyone, but he has surrounded atomic science with a religious framework of faith and miracles. The barbarians once more launch an attack on Terminus, but the priests of the scientific religion rebel. Seldon appears again in the Time Vault to warn that the spirit of regionalism (or nationalism) is stronger than spiritual power.

In "The Traders" ("The Big and the Little" in *Astounding* for August 1944) another fifty years have passed. The Foundation has absorbed its barbarian neighbors and rules them with its scientific religion. Traders have sprung up to sell Foundation atomic power to other worlds for metals. The Foundation is committed to expansion through the export of its religion, but Trader Limmar Ponyets rescues a Foundation missionary posing as a Trader and persuades a reluctant planet to allow the introduction of Foundation machines not through religion but Trader guile and Askonian greed.

"The Merchant Princes" (published as "The Wedge" in *Astounding*, October 1944) takes place about twenty-five years later. Religion has rigidified into faith. The Mayor's office has stultified; even the Traders have grown rich and self-satisfied. In a series of political maneuverings, Hober Mallow, a Trader who is being considered as a candidate for Mayor, is sent to Korell, where he persuades its ambitious ruler that the Foundation's atomic devices will increase

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his profits. The Korellian economy becomes dependent upon Foundation devices and efficiency. Mallow traces Korellian weapons to Siwenna, where a viceroy of the Empire wants to carve a new Empire out of the remote barbarian provinces. Back on Terminus, Mallow is placed on trial for surrendering a Foundation priest to Korellian authorities, but turns the tables on his accusers, wins his freedom and election as mayor, and watches—without doing anything—Korellian atomic cruisers attack the Foundation. But Korellians rebel when Foundation devices begin to fail and their prosperity is threatened. Mallow predicts that in future crises money power will be as useless as religion.

The second volume of the Trilogy, entitled *Foundation and Empire*, is made up of two novellas. The first, "The General" (called "Dead Hand" in the April 1945 *Astounding*), takes place about forty years after "The Merchant Princes." Bel Riose, an ambitious and capable young general for the decaying Empire, mounts an attack on the Foundation, whose reputation by now has reached Trantor. The Merchant Princes, the only Foundation leaders, are without ideas or meaningful defense. Subjugation seems certain until the Emperor arrests Riose for treason. This crisis has resolved itself: a weak general was no threat to the Foundation and the Emperor could not tolerate a strong general lest he seize the throne. Only a strong Emperor and a strong general could endanger the Foundation, but a strong Emperor remains strong by permitting no strong subjects. Even a strong Emperor who was also a general could not risk engaging in foreign wars lest rebellion spring up in his absence. Under any combination of circumstances, the Foundation had to win out.

"The Mule" (*Astounding*, November and December 1945) takes place 105 years after the execution of Riose. New problems have arisen: wealthy Traders have accumulated too much power and are squeezing out the small traders, and a new and mysterious conqueror of worlds called the "Mule" has come into prominence. The worlds fall without a battle, the most recent of them the pleasure world Kalgan. Newly married Toran and Bayta, sent to Kalgan by the small traders to stir up a war between the Mule and the Foundation, rescue the Mule's court fool, Magnifico, and flee to Terminus with Han Pritcher, Foundation spy. But the Mule attacks and wins battle after battle until his forces conquer Terminus itself at the moment that the projection of Seldon reveals that he has not foreseen this crisis. Toran, Bayta, the Fool, and scientist Ebling Mis eventually reach Trantor, now in ruins, to search the old Imperial

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Library for the location of the Second Foundation. As Mis is about to reveal the location, Bayta shoots and kills him, and reveals that the Fool is the Mule. He has the ability to adjust people's emotions, and everywhere they have taken him he has prepared the way for defeat. His one mistake was to leave Bayta unadjusted because he valued too highly the natural emotion from the one person who liked him. The Mule, a mutant, whose accidental appearance could not be predicted, cannot be a long-term force because, like his namesake, he is sterile.

The third volume of the *Trilogy*, entitled *Second Foundation*, is made up of two more novellas. The first, "Search by the Mule" ("Now You See It . . ." in the January 1948 *Astounding*), picks up about five years after "The Mule." The Mule has consolidated his empire but continues his search for the Second Foundation. He sends out the adjusted Han Pritcher with the unadjusted Bail Channis on a final search. The Second Foundation psychologists make an appearance in sections labeled INTERLUDES, discussing the situation. Channis leads the expedition to Rossem, where the Mule arrives, having traced the ship, to reveal that he has used Channis, whom he suspects of being a Second Foundation agent, to lead him to the Second Foundation. The First Speaker of the Second Foundation enters to tell the Mule that in his absence Second Foundation psychologists will sow rebellion on Kalgan, and in the moment when the Mule realizes how he has been tricked the First Speaker enters his mind and reconstructs his memories, eliminating the Mule as a danger.

"Search by the Foundation" (". . . And Now You Don't" in *Astounding* in November and December of 1949 and January of 1950) concludes the *Trilogy*. It opens about seventy years after the end of "Search by the Mule," as a group of conspirators gather in the home of Dr. Toran Darell on Terminus; they fear that the Second Foundation is controlling the Foundation by tampering with the minds of key individuals. They are determined to locate the Second Foundation to remove this threat to their freedom. One of them goes to search the Mule's old palace on Kalgan, along with Darell's romantic, fourteen-year-old daughter Arcadia (Arkady), a stowaway. Meanwhile, in separate chapters, the First Speaker and an apprentice for Speakerhood discuss Seldon's Plan: it contemplated the development of a future civilization based on mental science and led by Second Foundation psychologists. Now that citizens know about the existence of the Second Foundation, they have begun to believe that it will prevent all mishaps and are failing to exercise normal

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initiative; the predictions may not work out. Another group is actively fighting the idea of a ruling class of psychologists. The Second Foundation has had to adopt a low-probability project to preserve the Plan and themselves, by working with individuals rather than large groups.

Arkady is forced to flee Kalgan with the aid of Preem Palver and his wife, who take her back to their farm cooperative on Trantor. The inheritor of the Mule's empire attacks the Foundation and forces its fleet back to the Foundation's original group of planets before his fleet is wiped out. The conspirators gather once more in Darell's home, each claiming the solution to the mystery of the Second Foundation. But Darell caps them all by his invention of a device that creates Mental Static and renders helpless minds capable of advanced mental science. One of the group collapses when the device is turned on. Darell has deduced from a message sent by Arkady that the Second Foundation is located on Terminus itself; now other members on Terminus will be sought out and neutralized. In a final chapter the First Speaker reveals to the apprentice that the plan has worked: fifty men and women of the Second Foundation have been sacrificed, but the Foundation is convinced that the Second Foundation has been destroyed, and Seldon's Plan has been restored. Actually, as is justified in a series of explanations, the Second Foundation is located on Trantor, and the farmer Preem Palver is the First Speaker.

This, in brief, is the narrative of *The Foundation Trilogy*, a series that has never been out of print since its first book publication. Asimov abandoned the series with "Search by the Foundation" because it had grown too difficult to bring the reader up to date on everything that had gone before, and he was tired of it. In his autobiography he reveals that while he was writing "Search by the Foundation" (". . . And Now You Don't") he "disliked it intensely and found working on it very difficult." Even Campbell's persistence in demanding open endings that would allow sequels could not persuade Asimov, and the future history that envisioned 1,000 years of Seldon's Plan ended at less than 400 (although Asimov revealed recently that he is under considerable pressure to write one more Foundation novel). Nevertheless, Asimov used his concept of a humanly inhabited galaxy, of an outward movement of humanity from Earth until Earth itself was forgotten, and the rise of an Empire and its eventual fall as the background for half a dozen later novels and several dozen shorter stories.

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Other authors have used the background as well, not so much taking it directly from the *Trilogy* as from the assumptions, of which the *Trilogy* was a part, that became the shared property of a generation of science-fiction writers. It begins with the expansion of humanity into the galaxy in the same way that Europe ventured forth in the Age of Exploration to discover and then to colonize the rest of the world; Jack Williamson has described this concept as "the central myth of science fiction." It is not original with Asimov; it was built by many writers, in the magazine period particularly by Edward Elmer "Doc" Smith and Edmond Hamilton; but Asimov said it best and most completely in the series of stories published in *Astounding* between 1942 and 1949. It has since been used by writers as diverse as Jerry Pournelle and Ursula K. Le Guin.

The key assumptions, which entered the joint consciousness of science fiction writers and still reside there as if carved in tablets of stone rather than printed on ephemeral pulp paper, were not simply the expansion of humanity into the galaxy but the development of a human empire and then its decline and fall. Any story that uses as its background a decaying empire, or assumes that a human empire has existed but has been destroyed, leaving its human-colonized worlds to evolve independently, or speculates about a project to bring the scattered worlds of a once-great human empire back into a new organization, is built, consciously or not, on foundations laid down by Asimov. Morever, Asimov described a totally human galaxy, partly to avoid Campbell's prejudices about relationships between humans and aliens; and this concept may have been comforting, even flattering, to his readers.

All of this, however, doesn't totally explain the *Trilogy*'s popularity. For this the reader must delve into what the series is about and how it handles its narrative.

One significant aspect of the series is Asimov's invention of psychohistory, with all its implications for determinism and free will. Psychohistory was put together out of psychology, sociology, and history—not hard sciences such as Campbell had a reputation for preferring but at best soft sciences, a behavioral science, a social science, and another discipline that has difficulty deciding whether to define itself as a social science or a humanity. Actually, as Asimov pointed out in his 1953 essay "Social Science Fiction," Campbell had encouraged social science fiction—that is, fiction that "is concerned with the impact of scientific advance upon human beings"—from his first days as an editor. Moreover, Campbell had pointed out the logical basis for using the soft sciences for the kind of extrapolation

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he preferred, in his 1947 essay for Lloyd A. Eschbach's *Of Worlds Beyond*, "The Science of Science Fiction Writing":

> To be science fiction, not fantasy, an honest effort at prophetic extrapolation of the known must be made. Ghosts can enter science fiction—if they're logically explained, but not if they are simply the ghosts of fantasy. Prophetic extrapolation can derive from a number of different sources, and apply in a number of fields. Sociology, psychology, and parapsychology are, today, not true sciences; therefore instead of forecasting future results of applications of sociological science of today, we must forecast the *development of a science* of sociology.

Psychohistory is the art of prediction projected as a science; later it might have been called "futurology" or "futuristics."

The ability to predict or foresee the future has been a persistent notion in science fiction almost from its beginnings, and hundreds of stories have been based on various mechanisms for doing it and various outcomes of the attempt. One might cite, as examples, Robert Heinlein's first story, "Life-Line"; Lewis Padgett's "What You Need"; and James Blish's "Beep." What Asimov brought to the concept was the science of probabilities as a mechanism, the element of uncertainty for suspense, and the philosophical question of "what is worth predicting?" for depth. His method—statistical probability—prohibited the prediction of any actions smaller than those of large aggregates of population. Four decades earlier, incidentally, H. G. Wells had told the Sociological Society that a science of sociology was impossible because everything in the universe was unique and sociologists could not deal with sufficiently large numbers to handle them statistically, as physicists did. Asimov could deal with large numbers, and he defines psychohistory, in the epigraph quoted from the *Encyclopedia Galactica* (1020 F.E.—Foundational Era) for section 4 of "The Psychohistorians," as "that branch of mathematics which deals with the reactions of human conglomerates to fixed social and economic stimuli. . . . Implicit in all these definitions is the assumption that the human conglomerate being dealt with is sufficiently large for valid statistical treatment. . . . A further necessary assumption is that the human conglomerate be itself unaware of psychohistoric analysis in order that its reactions be truly random." Finally, Asimov answers the question of "what is worth predicting?" with: not individual human lives but a great event whose consequences might be avoided, such

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as the fall of an empire and the shortening of dark ages of barbarism, war, hunger, despair, and death.

Asimov has been as open about the origins of the *Foundation* stories as he has been about the other details of his life and writing; in fact, one of the charms about the man in his openness. Well, openness may be understatement: since 1962 all of his anthologies and collections of stories have been strung together like ornaments on the string of his life story, culminating in *Opus 100*, *Opus 200*, and his 640,000-word autobiography. In another man this obsession with self might be interpreted as rampant egotism or arrogance, at the least; but Asimov removes the curse of what he calls his "cheerful self-appreciation" by a considerable amount of equal "self-deflation" and an overriding air of frank amazement at his own success, an attitude that he asks the reader to share.

In his autobiography and a piece he contributed to the *SFWA Bulletin* in 1967 entitled "There's Nothing Like a Good Foundation," Asimov traced the idea for the *Foundation* stories to a 1941 subway ride when he was going to visit Campbell at his Street & Smith office. Searching for an idea, Asimov looked down at a collection of Gilbert and Sullivan plays he was reading, opened it at *Iolanthe*, and saw the picture of the fairy queen kneeling in front of Private Willis of the Grenadier Guards. From this his mind wandered to soldiers, to a military society, to feudalism, to the breakup of the Roman Empire. When he reached Campbell's office, he told the editor that he was planning to write a story about the breakup of the Galactic Empire. "He talked and I talked and he talked and I talked and when I left I had the Foundation series in mind."

Exactly what he had in mind may affect the critic's judgment of the work. He did not, for instance, have in mind all the different permutations in idea and story; they were built, one on another, as the years passed and the *Trilogy* developed. But he must have discussed with Campbell the implications of prediction. Some critics have tried to explain "psychohistory" on philosophical bases, as "the science that Marxism never became" (Wollheim) or "the vulgar, mechanical, debased version of Marxism promulgated in the Thirties" (Elkins). Elkins also related the Trilogy's enduring popularity to its fatalism, which "accurately sizes up the modern situation."

People do talk a great deal about determinism in the *Trilogy*. When Bel Riose is informed about Seldon's predictions by Ducem Barr, his authority on the Foundation, he says, "Then we stand clasped tightly in the forcing hand of the Goddess of Historical Necessity?" But Barr corrects him: "Of *Psycho*-Historical Necessity."

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And Riose is defeated, apparently, by what seem like Seldon's inexorable laws.

Psychohistory had its origins not in Marxism (Asimov has called Wollheim's speculation "reading his bent into me," for Asimov has "never read anything about it"), but in John Campbell's ideas about symbolic logic. Symbolic logic, Campbell told the young Asimov in their first discussion, further developed would so clear up the mysteries of the human mind as to leave human actions predictable. Campbell more or less forced Asimov to include some references to symbolic logic in the first story, "Foundation"—"forced," because Asimov knew nothing about symbolic logic and didn't believe, as Campbell insisted, that symbolic logic would "unobscure the language and leave everything clear." Asimov's analogy was to the kinetic theory of gases, "where the individual molecules in the gas remain as unpredictable as ever, but the average action is completely predictable."

The spirit of the early stories, however, is determinedly anti-deterministic. If intelligent, courageous, and forceful individuals did not attempt to retrieve the situation, most of the crises—all but one, perhaps—would not be resolved satisfactorily. Seldon's predictions, like God's will, are hidden from all the characters except the psychologists of the Second Foundation, as they are from the reader. Seldon's prophecies are revealed only after the fact, and even the solutions that he or others say are obvious *are* obvious, as in all good histories, only in retrospect. At the time they aren't obvious to anyone but Salvor Hardin or Hober Mallow; the reader has no feeling that the crises would have been resolved if persons such as Harden and Mallow had not been there. Moreover, the predictions of psychohistory are expressed as probabilities; and one of the necessary ingredients, discussed in detail in "Search by the Foundation," is the exercise of normal initiative.

As a matter of fact, Asimov has the best of both determinism and free will. Psychohistory and Seldon's Plan provide the framework for his account of diverse episodes about a variety of characters over a period of 400 years, and those episodes feature a number of strong-minded individuals seeking solutions to a series of problems as they arise. If determinism alone were Asimov's subject, the *Trilogy* would reveal characters continually defeated in their attempts to change events, or characters like puppets manipulated by godlike prophets, or unable to fight the onrushing current of necessity.

A work as depressing as that would not have remained popular over more than a quarter of a century. Bel Riose is the only character

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who stares into the face of determinism; only he is frustrated by psychohistorical necessity rather than by the actions of an individual. But in "The General," Bel Riose is not the viewpoint character. The question for the reader is not Riose's predicament but how he is to be stopped; and the resolution does not celebrate the victory of determinism but the survival of the Foundation, no matter if through no efforts of the Foundation. The reader, whose sympathies are engaged with the Foundation, sees events as an ally, not as an opponent. The Foundation's unusual power of survival, however, influences both the Foundation and its enemies; it supplies to the Foundation confidence in ultimate victory (which can become overconfidence, and itself a problem), and it discourages the Foundation's attackers—but never enough to eliminate challenges entirely. Asimov seems to be more interested in the psychological impact of Seldon's Plan than its philosophical implications. Indeed, it is only from the outside that Seldon's Plan seems like determinism; from within, the Foundation leaders still must find solutions without Seldon's help.

Even in the second half of the *Trilogy*, questions of free will raised by the events of the story relate not to Seldon's Plan but to the psychological manipulation of minds such as that effected by the Mule and the Second Foundation psychologists. The statement of the story's actions (if not its discussion) is that nothing happens unless someone makes it happen; the reader is told on several occasions that "Seldon's laws help those who help themselves."

The Biblical parallel is significant. Psychohistory is no more restrictive of free will than the Judeo-Christian deity. Christians are given free will by an omniscient God; the characters in the *Trilogy* get free will from an omniscient author, as an act of authorial necessity. At the end of *Second Foundation*, Seldon's Plan has been restored, events are back in their ordered course, and the rise of a new and better empire to reunite the Galaxy and the creation of a new civilization based on mental science seem assured. The Second Foundation psychologists have won; that victory, benevolent as it seems, may have ominous undertones; but if we are to accept Asimov as being as benevolent as he is omniscient the reader ought to assume that the benefits of mental science will be available to everyone.

Determinism, then, is not what the *Trilogy* is about; the structure of the episodes is anti-deterministic, since the outcome is not determined. The basic appeal of the stories, an essential replacement for the more customary narrative drives of action and romance, is

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problem-solving. The episodes present a problem, much like the formal detective story, and challenge the reader to find a solution. In the first published story, "Foundation," the solution is even withheld until the next episode, a freelancing strategy of Asimov's to insure a sequel (it was published in the very next issue) that almost accidentally reinforced the problem-solving quality of the stories. For the reader the fascination lies in the presentation of clues, the twists of plot, and the final solution that makes sense of it all. In the final episode of *Foundation*, Jorane Sutt says to Hober Mallow, but might have been speaking of Asimov: "There is nothing straight about you: no motive that hasn't another behind it; no statement that hasn't three meanings."

The series of searches for the Second Foundation, the various clues pursued to their inconclusive ends, the near revelation by Ebling Mis of its location (though he may have been wrong), and the succession of incorrect solutions are Asimov imitating the methods of the detective novel that he would later shape more obviously (in response to Campbell's challenge) into science-fiction detective novels and stories beginning with *The Caves of Steel* (serialized in 1953). In the final chapter of *Second Foundation*, with its succession of "I've got the answer—no, I've got the answer" reversals, Asimov no doubt is parodying the concluding scenes of a thousand formal detective novels.

But even this—science fiction as problem-solving—does not provide the total explanation for the *Trilogy*'s success. Other aspects, more peripheral to the central structure, might be cited: the characters, for instance, though scorned by some critics, engage the reader's sympathies; they are similar to each other, it is true, but mostly in being men and women of action. They do not let events happen to them (as might seem more appropriate if the theme of the *Trilogy* actually was determinism, as is true in the naturalistic novels of Zola, for instance); they make things happen. The *Trilogy*, after all, is a history, and history is about people who have made things happen. The characters may not be strongly differentiated—Salvor Hardin, Hober Mallow, and Limmar Ponyets may be interchangeable—but they are as differentiated as the personages in most histories. Clearly they are adequate for the purposes they serve in the *Trilogy*.

Asimov also provides some of the philosophy of history along the way. History fascinates him—he almost took his graduate degree in history instead of chemistry; his customary method of developing both fiction and non-fiction is historical; and a number of his non-

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fiction books are concerned with history. Some of what Asimov says about history comes from his model, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, little seems to derive from Marxism or whatever impressions of it were in the air when the *Trilogy* was being conceived and created, and a good deal seems to be Asimov's own observations. Government, for instance, never is what it appears to be: in the *Trilogy* figureheads and powers behind the throne proliferate. Every innovation rigidifies into sterile tradition, which must, in turn, be overturned: the grip of the Encyclopedists, for instance, must be broken by Salvor Hardin; and the political power of the Mayor must be broken, in its turn, by Hober Mallow; and the economic power of the Traders must be modified by the incorporation of the independent traders; and so on. There is, to be sure, a narrative necessity to keep the series going; but the reader cannot ignore the inevitable feeling of continual change, which seems like a philosophy: one generation's solution is the next generation's problem. Asimov probably would agree with this.

On top of this, and perhaps the most important aspect of Asimov's writing, is his rationalism. More than any other writer of his time (the Campbell era, as Asimov calls it) and even later, Asimov speaks with the voice of reason. Avoid the emotional, the irrational, the *Trilogy* says. Avoid the obvious military reaction to threats of military attack, says Salvor Hardin. Do not throw the slender military might of the Foundation against the great battleships of the Empire, says Hober Mallow, whose continual retreat before the attacking Korellian forces is considered treason.

Rationality is the one human trait that can always be trusted, the *Trilogy* says; and the reader believes that it is Asimov's conviction as well. Sometimes rational decisions are based on insufficient information and turn out to be wrong, or the person making the decision is not intelligent enough to see through to the ultimate solution rather than the partial one; but nothing but reason works at all. Even the antagonists—who cannot legitimately be called villains—are as rational as the protagonists. In the stories that Asimov likes best rationality does not triumph over irrationality or emotion but over other rationality, as in the conflict between the Mule and Bayta (though the Mule is betrayed, as well, by an unnatural element of emotion), between the Mule and the First Speaker, and between the Second Foundation and the First Foundation.

Such confidence in rationality must have been comforting not only in personal terms but in terms of the times when the stories were

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written and published. Asimov was only 21 when he started writing "Foundation" and had passed through a difficult adolescence, and was still ill-at-ease with women and society in general; and he was writing largely for maladjusted teenagers who had sublimated their sexual and social frustrations into various kinds of intellectual activity, including the reading of science fiction. The belief that reason could solve problems not only was desirable, it may have been necessary. Moreover, events in the larger world, though they did not encourage a belief in the rationality of human behavior, nourished the hope that rationality would prevail: the world had just pulled itself out of the incomprehensibility of the Depression to plunge itself into the insanity of war. Just as the theory of psychohistory was for Asimov a way to make Hitler's persistent victories bearable—no matter what initial successes the Nazis managed, the logic of history (psychohistory) would eventually bring about their defeat—so reason had to eventually prove its supremacy. Later, as the Foundation stories proceeded to appear, the success of the Allies, aided by the products of the scientific laboratories, confirmed that earlier faith.

The *Trilogy* also offers more isolated insights. Often these surface in the epigraphs that precede most of the chapters in the form of excerpts from the 116th edition of the *Encyclopedia Galactica* published in 1020 F.E. by the Encyclopedia Galactica Publishing Co., Terminus. But Asimov also includes some illuminating concepts within the text of the stories. "It is the chief characteristic of the religion of science that it works," he says in "The Mayors." "Never let your sense of morals prevent you from doing what is right," he has Limmar Ponyets say in "The Traders." "Seldon assumed that human reaction to stimuli would remain constant," Mis comments in "The Mule."

The statement by Mis sums up Asimov's own attitude toward character. His characters have been criticized for being "one-dimensional," as unchanged from contemporary people by the passage of time and the altered conditions in which they live. But this occurs by choice rather than from lack of skill or failure of observation. Asimov divided his term "social science fiction" into two widely different types of stories: "chess game" and "chess puzzle." The chess game begins with "a fixed number of pieces in a fixed position" and "the pieces change their positions according to a fixed set of rules." In a chess-puzzle story, the rules apply but the position varies. The rules by which the pieces move (common to both types) may be equated, Asimov says, "with the motions (emotions?) and impulses

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of humanity: hate, love, fear, suspicion, passion, hunger, lust, and so on. Presumably these will not change while mankind remains Homo sapiens." The basic human characteristics will remain the same.

Asimov may not be right, but his choice is defensible against the opposing Marxist view that character will change when society becomes more rational. In addition, the *Trilogy* is concerned not with the revolution, or even evolution, of character but with the evolution of an idea. There is a strategic narrative value in the maintenance of contemporary characteristics. The recognizability of characters is a reflection of the fact that to the characters their world and their responses to it are commonplace. This is an application of the technique that Heinlein perfected as an alternative to the "gee whiz!" school of writing about the future, which introduced a character from the past in order to elicit his wonder at each new future marvel.

A story of the future is not much different from a historical novel, and its problems are similar to those of the translation from a foreign language. It is not a question of verisimilitude alone but of how much and what kind. Asimov chooses what might be called the verisimilitude of feeling over the verisimilitude of language or the verisimilitude of character, just as a historical novelist or a translator might choose the flavor of the original rather than a literal representation. Science fiction stories about changes in humanity or its language have been written, but the *Trilogy* is not one of them and does not pretend to be.

Asimov achieves verisimilitude in another way: by choosing appropriate but unfamiliar names for characters, objects, and processes. Every name seems foreign and every one seems credible, and these are aspects of science fiction that the science-fiction reader values above subtle differentiations in character—and non-science-fiction readers often find puzzling at best and repulsive at worst. "Psychohistory" itself has proved so apt a name that it has been picked up as terminology for an academic discipline, though not, to be sure, the discipline Asimov had in mind. The names of characters are subtly altered, by changing the spelling or dropping or rearranging letters, to suggest evolution within continuity, and the subtlety increases as the series progresses: Hari Seldon leads to Hober Mallow leads to Han Pritcher leads to Bail Channis and eventually to Arkady Darell. Possibly only Heinlein was Asimov's superior in creating future societies, though several have been better with names.

Asimov, however, was the master of the epigraph. Models of im-

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itation, clarity, and dramatization, they may have offered some preview of his later skill at science popularization. The epigraphs served two useful purposes: as a medium for exposition that became increasingly burdensome as the series continued—in "Search by the Foundation" a long essay Arkady writes for school serves this function (but also convinces Asimov that the series must end here)—but even in the earlier sections helps Asimov provide essential background information; and as a framework that puts events into context and lends to the structure the verisimilitude of a future perspective.

The final virtue of the *Trilogy*, and perhaps the most important to its extended popularity, is its exhaustive treatment of an idea. That idea was not psychohistory or even determinism: it was the Foundations. Each story examined one aspect of the Foundations and their relative positions in the Galaxy and in the events happening around them. In "The Psychohistorians," for instance, the problem for the Foundation is how to persuade the Empire to let it be set up on Terminus and how to persuade 100,000 Encyclopedists and their families to leave the comfort and security of Trantor for the rigors and uncertainties of the frontier; the problem, of course, is concealed until the conclusion, even until after the resolution. "The Encyclopedists" presents the next problem: how is the Foundation to survive the power of the barbarians that surround Terminus as the Empire slowly begins to lose its control of the periphery? The first solution is to play off each group of barbarians against the others; the second is to supply the barbarians with atomic energy within a religious framework centered around Terminus.

By "The Mayors" the problem has become: what will happen to the Foundation when the barbarians are completely equipped with atomic weapons and are restless to use them? The answer: the priests of the scientific religion will not permit an attack on Terminus. In "The Traders" the question has changed to how Foundation hegemony will spread once the religious framework is recognized as a political tool of the Foundation. The answer is: by trade; economic motivations can succeed where religion fails. Sometimes two problems converge in one story, as in "The Merchant Princes": the political and religious structures have rigidified into useless tradition, and the Foundation has been discovered by the Empire. The solution to those problems is that the Traders seize political power, and war against the Foundation is clearly linked with economic deprivation.

Each problem solved strengthens the Foundation and its progress

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toward an ultimate reunification of the Galaxy, but each solution contains the seed of a new problem. In "The General," the Foundation faces the problem of its own success, which makes it an attractive prize for the Empire; but it is protected by the essential nature of a decaying Empire—a weak Emperor cannot permit strong generals. In "The Mule" and its sequel, "Search by the Mule," Asimov strikes out in a new direction: with its victory by default over the Empire, the Foundation has no clear challenges to the eventual extension of its power throughout the Galaxy and the final realization of Seldon's Plan—but what about the unexpected developments that Seldon's psychohistorical equations could not predict because they involve elements of the unique? Like the genetic accident that creates the Mule and his unpredictable and Plan-destroying power? The answer: the Second Foundation. Asimov had planted a mention of the Second Foundation in the very first of the Foundation stories, not because he had anticipated the function of the Second Foundation, but as a safety measure, a strategic reserve in case something developed in the plot so that he needed a way out. In "The Mule," the Second Foundation emerged as a group of psychologists to whom Seldon's Plan was entrusted and who were charged with responsibility for protecting it. Finally, in "Search by the Foundation," two new questions are raised by the revelation of the Second Foundation: what will happen to the Foundation now that it knows of the existence of the Second Foundation and suspects its custody of Seldon's Plan (which destroys one of the basic requirements for the effectiveness of psychohistorical predictions), and what can the Second Foundation do to restore the previous condition and rescue Seldon's Plan? The answer is dual-purpose: by deceiving the Foundation into the belief that it has located and destroyed the Second Foundation.

In "There's Nothing Like a Good Foundation," Asimov wrote that "in designing each new Foundation story, I found I had to work within an increasingly constricted area, with progressively fewer and fewer degrees of freedom. I was forced to seize whatever way out I could find without worrying about how difficult I might make the next story. Then when I came to the next story, those difficulties arose and beat me over the head." The difficulties about which Asimov complains are not apparent: each story seems designed to arise out of the earlier stories and each develops with an air of inevitability appropriate to psychohistory itself. But it is critical folly to assume that the *Trilogy* is an organic whole, conceived before it was begun, crafted in accordance with some master plan, and

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produced in full consideration of the contribution of each part of the whole. External and internal evidence demonstrate that Asimov moved from story to story, solving the problems of each as they arose and discovering, on his own or with the help of Campbell, new problems on which to base new stories. The *Trilogy*, instead, succeeds by its ingenuity, and it is a tribute to Asimov's ingenuity and cool rationality that the *Trilogy* seems so complete, so well integrated.

Foundations should be solid. They should leave no important areas uncovered. Thus it seems with *The Foundation Trilogy*, and this may be the major reason it has survived and why so many later stories were built upon the assumptions that it and earlier works pioneered. But the reader should not be surprised if some day in the not-too-distant future a new Foundation novel should appear in which the final solution to "Search by the Foundation" represents the problem.

SECOND SOLUTION TO LUCIFER IN LAS VEGAS (from page 62)

The bet favors Lucifer again. One ball picks out a slot, and the chances the other ball will find the same slot are $\frac{1}{38}$, not $\frac{1}{1,444}$. Since the correct odds are 37 to 1 that the balls fall in different slots, odds of 100 to 1 give the Devil a sizeable long-run edge.

Even though the bet favored him, the Devil was so infuriated when he lost that he conjured up all his psi energy to lay a curse on the student that made it impossible for him to win any bet in the casino for the rest of the night. Then the Devil, in a huge huff, hied himself back to Hell to get a decent night's sleep.

Suzie, the student's girl friend, was almost as psychic as Satan himself. She realized that the swarthy stranger was a man of limited psi powers, and she sensed at once the nature of his curse. Nevertheless she was delighted by the spell. Why? (The answer is on page 121.)

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THE EUMENIDES IN KO.

by Sheridan A. Simon

art: George Barr

I am called Roy spoken crossed now by still As idea... after ...ly

Dr. Simon, now 31, has a Ph.D. in physics and astronomy from the University of Rochester. He has taught those subjects for five years at Guilford College in North Carolina. This is his first fiction sale; his most recent publication elsewhere was in the Astrophysical Journal, *with: "A Numerical Technique for the Solution of Poisson's Equation for Flattened Centrally Condensed Objects." He and his wife have three cats: Beaumont, Toby, and Lefty.*

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. This means "king," I have found, in a language
, no one but once commonly understood when men
the oceans. Why I was given such a name I have no
, was the custom among my people, I was named seven days
. my birth by my mother. As I am now sixteen years old and
ally a man, she is of course long dead.

I remember well the time of her death. I was eight, then, and her only living child, though she was more fertile than most and had carried seven all told. The last had come the year before, and the bearing of it had left a brown stain on the dirt floor that had not completely disappeared the nivht she died. I watched by the light of the fire while my father and the other men prayed over her. Her breath came harder and harder, and in the end her mouth was wide open as she gasped and gasped. She had no teeth.

I remember that clearly, that she had no teeth; and as a child I wondered about it. My father was older than she, twenty-five when she died, but still had most of his—still had them two years later when the cut on one hand festered and killed him. I am surprised by the vividness of that memory of her death: the firelight shining on the men's sweating backs, the black gulf of her open mouth, the piece of wood on the wall behind her with the ancients' markings on it.

I have gone back to the house we lived in since, having learned to read by my own efforts and quick wits, and found that it says **God Bless Our Ecosystem.** I trust this enlightens my reader no more than myself.

The day after my mother died, my father and I walked to the village. It was the custom among my people that a bereaved spouse should cut off one finger of the left hand. This was supposed to propitiate St. Velikovsky, lest he stop the sun in the sky and roast us all, and had to be done before witnesses to make certain that it was done properly. Despite the shock of my mother's death I was quite excited. There was one spot where one could stand in the village and see twelve houses at once, two with windows.

I was not allowed to watch the ceremony preceding my father's amputation as I had not yet reached puberty. There are some things it is best that a child not see. My presence was required later, however, in the usual pre-sunset ceremony, so I could not simply walk the two miles back to our house. It was of course forbidden to walk at night, lest we be seen by Satellites, so I would have the added excitement of sleeping in the house of Carl, my father's brother. Thinking of this, I walked toward the house to have a look at it.

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It was a fine, large building, nearly twenty feet in diameter, with a great firepit in the center and a hole in the roof for the smoke to escape. My father's brother said that it was the finest house in Carolina, and I am sure I believed him, though of course in the fabled lands of Europe there were supposed to be houses a hundred feet tall.

As I was making my inspection I heard a whistle behind me and turned to see my cousin Rufus. Rufus was twelve that year, over five feet tall, nearly the height of a man. He was much stronger and more confident than I was, and expected to join the adult men in religious ceremonies any day. He had been boasting of this for the past year without his body's taking notice, but he never lost any of his enthusiasm.

Today, though, he looked nervous and shifty-eyed. Even his whistle lacked its usual ring. "Hey, Rufe."

"Hey, Roy." He stood in front of me, still looking nervous. I hadn't seen him in such a state since his own mother had died, and I wondered if it were my mother's death that was getting him all pretzeled up.

"What's up, Rufe?" I didn't like his attitude and wished that he would be as he usually was. There was enough in the way of strangeness about this day already.

"Oh, nothing. You want to take a walk?" He looked at me intently.

"I just walked all the way from home, Rufe."

He shook his head. "Come *on*, Roy. Want to?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

"Hey." He led off down the slight slope behind his house; and I followed, puzzled but glad to be taking orders.

Behind his house, through the potatoes and beans (which came up all yellow that year and died before they were six inches tall), and through a patch of pines we walked, straight away from the village, till we came to that odd double-corridor in the trees that everyone in the area knew about and no one ever wanted to explain to me. Since anyone would talk to me about anything else, I took it for granted that the double-corridor had something to do with science.

If you are offended by my use of this word you had best discard my work and find something else, for it will recur.

Science!

Thus.

The double-corridor was covered with grass and a few small shrubs,

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but for no reason I could ever fathom no trees grew on it, except in the slight depression that divided it in half and made it a double-corridor. The whole affair was at least a hundred feet across and one could see a great distance in each direction along it. It seemed perfect for a house, with all the land already clear, but no one ever went near it. It *had* to be something to do with science.

That day, it was not deserted. A wagon stood in the far branch of the corridor.

It was the oddest wagon I'd ever seen. Even today, when I've walked all the region between the ocean and the mountains I've never seen another. It was so huge that it needed two horses to pull it, and it was covered all over with something like cloth. When we got closer, I could see that the covering had no threads. And if you don't believe me, what's that to me? It had no threads. I know what cotton looks like, and I've even seen wool, and it was neither.

"Rufe, what's that?" I can remember stopping as I first glimpsed it, and remember how I could hear my pulse pounding in my ears. I thought of my father, and realized that by now he was at the ceremony to take care of St. Velikovsky.

Rufus, who had led all the way, turned and grinned a very tense grin at me. "What's the matter, you scared of it? It's just a wagon, isn't it?"

"Yeah. No, I'm not scared." I think I would be even today, despite my strength and wits and vast knowledge of the ancients.

Rufus led on, though much more quietly, until we were within a few feet of the wagon and I could see clearly that the covering had no threads. It did not occur to me until later that they might be too thin to see; I merely thought of how dry it would be inside when it rained, with no spaces for water to seep through. There was no sound from inside the wagon.

"I found it yesterday," said Rufus. He spoke very quietly. "I don't think there's anyone inside."

"Did it come here by itself?" I was ready for anything at this point.

He looked at me and smiled his grown-up smile. "Hey, Roy. Sure. It came by itself and then unhitched its own horses, hey?" All I can say is that it didn't seem so bloody unlikely to me at the time.

"What's inside?" My natural intelligence was obvious even then, before I had taught myself to read the books I rescued from the fire.

"Let's see." We crept around to the back of the wagon, but there was no opening. Nor one at the front. Where there should have been openings to let a man in or out there were only long seams with

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parallel tracks of little white teeth, linked together. I looked around hurriedly. One of the tethered horses stared at me briefly, then went back to its own horsey thoughts. The horse was as big as a stallion, but I could see from where I was that it was not.

"Rufus, let's go. They'll be looking for us."

"Not till afternoon ceremonies."

"They might."

"Come on! You scared, little Roy?"

"No." And it isn't dark at night, either.

"Looking for something, gentlemen?"

The voice came from directly behind us. If there had been anywhere to run, I don't think either of us would've stopped short of the horizon; but he had us trapped between the wagon and himself.

Physically, he was a short man, with a thick black beard and very dark eyes. I don't remember what he was wearing, so it must have been something ordinary, a kilt-and-cloak. He stared right at us, and we froze. I glanced at Rufus, but he was white as a sheet (and where does *that* expression come from? Should it be sheep, rather than sheet?) and looked as if he were going to cry.

"Well?" He looked directly at me.

"No, sir."

"Then what in hell are you doing around my wagon?"

"I wanted to know what it's made out of, and why there aren't any doors." I've since learned better, but then the truth just seemed to leap out naturally.

He stared at me steadily for a moment and I was sure that he was going to kill me, though he wasn't even wearing a knife. Then he turned to Rufus. "What about you?"

"I'm his cousin."

The man looked at both of us for a moment more, as if considering whether or not we'd stew up nicely, and then grinned. "What the hell, eh? What the hell." He gestured at his wagon. "Polly, you're insane." At least, that's what it sounded like, though I've never heard of anyone else who ever named a wagon, let alone named it Polly. "Plastic," he said next, and that word I knew. We were always finding pieces of it, brivhtly colored, when we pushed the wooden plows through our fields. No one knew what the pieces were, though since they had to do with (whisper it) science, they were all burned as a matter of course.

What he did now was obviously impossible. I have remembered it well, as I remember most things; but I cannot explain what he did. He tore a hole in the cover of the wagon, right along the seam,

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those little teeth opening up as neatly as my own do. He pushed each of us up into the opening, then climbed in himself, ran his hand down that seam, and it disappeared again, leaving us sealed in.

Sunlight shone right through the covering of his wagon, even better than it did through the greased cloth my people used to cover windows when they had them. That didn't help. I could see all right, but nothing looked like anything I'd ever seen before. Along one side ran shiny shelves, ridiculously thin, packed solidly with oblong shapes I know now are books. Still stranger things covered the other wall. One large box held kitchen things, but made of something as reflective as a pool of water on a sunny day. I wanted to cover my eyes and cry. Rufus, beside me, was shaking. I wanted to go home. I wanted my father.

"You boys like stories?" He stared at me again.

"Who are you, sir?" Curiosity was barely victorious over crying.

He gestured all around him at the contents of the wagon, then laughed. "Can't you guess? Don't you see my big, sharp teeth?" He smiled broadly. His teeth were even, very white, but no sharper than anyone else's even so.

"Sir?"

He waved around again, then seemed to remember something. He reached into a green box and pulled out three brown lumps. He popped one into his mouth. "Try one of these." He held out the other two in his left hand, which was large, brown, and had all of its fingers. Where was his wife? I took one of the brown lumps, and—after another smile—Rufus took the other.

By all the saints in Atlantis, I've never tasted anything like those lumps in my life. If ever I see one again, I'll kill to eat it. My whole set of innards was singing like we do at midsummer on St. Daniken's Day, singing as loud as we can to scare off his charioteers.

"You see, gentlemen, I'm not so bad, eh?" He smiled, and I saw a stain of brown on one front tooth.

Rufus was licking his lips and looking more excited now than scared. "I know what you are!"

"And what's that?"

"A scientist!"

The silence that fell for a moment was like one I remember after I hit my head on a rafter once while hiding from a certain young lady's father. Remembering the brown lump, I shouted at my cousin. "He is not!"

But the man shook his head at me as I looked back at him. "Yes,

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I am." But he was smiling, and I still tasted the lump.

"Hey, a scientist." I tried to make my voice sound grown up, I remember, and felt a thrill of adventure rather than fear. I glanced at Rufus. He was evidently getting into the adventure game as well.

"How about a story, now?" He was picking over some books that were piled carelessly on the floor. He picked one up that depicted on its cover a man with a strange hat who was holding a spear with a long blade. Softly, he began to read.

"Sing, Muse, of the anger of Achilles. . . ."

Neither of us noticed how late it was until it became too dark for the scientist to read. Even then, we had a sort of mutual agreement not to remind each other that we had to go. We were both too full of colossal battles, angry gods, and the heroism of Hector. He had not finished the story, and it is not among the few books I saved. Since no one now can print books or read them, except for me, I suppose I shall grow old and die without knowing the outcome of that ancient war over Helen. He had not touched any of the other books. They waited patiently.

When it was dark, he asked us quietly if we had ever seen the stars at night. He grinned when he asked us, a secret-shared kind of grin; and I knew that he must have, so I admitted that I had and so did Rufus. I think we each surprised the other, since we had both professed to have seen Satellites trying to get through our doors at night. At this admission, the scientist moved his hand over the back gate of his wagon and a seam opened wide. We all jumped down, but he reached back inside for a squat cylinder which he placed on an oddly-shaped stand. I had never seen anything like that cylinder and never have again. All I know of its manufacture is that it contained the ancients' glass, a transparent material, hard and tough, that no one now knows how to make. And damn you if you don't believe me.

He did things to the cylinder, pointing it straight up to where the half-moon was shining brightly. "There. No—there. Ah." I wondered what he was doing, but was afraid to ask. My mind still buzzed with the adventures of Diomedes. I wondered what bronze was, and how I could get some.

Finally, he gestured to me. "Look through this." He pointed to a small tube attached to the big cylinder. I looked.

I looked *down* on the moon. I saw hills and valleys, white and sunlit, and black shadows.

"Where's their fields?" My voice was weak, as I remember, but I

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expected green fields.

The scientist took the tube back and moved it slightly. "Here."

I looked again, and could see in the middle of a circular valley a vital, living green, contrasting with the dead white around it. I could see that the green was broken up into tiny squares of slightly different shades, but the green area was somehow not as clear as the territory around it. "I can't see any people."

"It's too far away, Roy. But there are people there. My people."

"Are they like us?"

"No more different from you than your cousin. They went there from here a long time ago."

"What about stars?" I wanted to see *everything* now.

"Hey, Roy, let me." Rufus crowded me aside to look for himself. At the sight of the hills and valleys he let out a shout of excitement, and the scientist chuckled.

While Rufus looked through the tube, tense with excitement, the scientist turned back to me. His face held an odd mixture of sadness and joy. "The stars are like the sun, but very far away, so they look small and dim."

"What's the sun like?"

"It's bigger than the whole world, a lot bigger, and made of fire."

"Are all the stars made out of fire?" They had always looked cold to me.

He smiled slightly. "No. See that one over there?" He pointed to a bright star, just rising in the east and twinkling madly. "That star is called Sirius."

"Yeah?"

"It has a companion star, close to it, going around it like the earth goes around the sun."

"What?"

"I'll tell you about that later. The companion star is too dim to see." He grinned slightly. "A great scientist named Sagan once said the companion star was no bigger than the earth, and made of diamond."

He got no further than that. There was a shout from the woods in the direction of the village, and a crowd of men ran at us. The scientist yelled at us to get away, but as he tried to place the squat cylinder inside the wagon they caught him.

When Rufus told them what he had done, they smashed the squat cylinder with rocks, breaking its glass and stomping its thin tube. Then they put out the scientist's eyes with their knives, and when he ran in circles with blood streaming down his cheeks, stumbling

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and clutching, my uncle Carl told them all to throw stones. When they were finished, the scientist was dead.

They burned the wagon, singing prayers to keep the Satellites away, and praised all the saints that science was dead and men could live their lives in communion with nature. But they didn't know what books were, so I was able to save some of them from the ashes a few nights later.

When I had saved all I could from the wreckage I carried it for nearly a mile along the double-corridor until I found a good hiding-place for it, under the roots of a fallen tree. One of the things I saved was a small device called a radio. It will function only in direct sunlight, a fact that took me a long time to discover, but I have made much use of it since.

Soon I will have a wagon of my own. I will be more clever and more careful than my scientist was, but as I am a native it will be easier for me than it was for him. I think I will start with stories, though. Even my uncle Carl would not suspect the *Iliad* of being a product of science.

It is the same season of the year now as it was when I met my scientist, when I was only a child. In a few minutes it will be dark, and I will go outside and gaze into the East until I find the star, Sirius. Despite all my knowledge and experience I am still impressed by the description of its companion that I heard from my scientist so long ago.

No bigger than the earth, and made of diamond?

We'll see.

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RELATIVELY SPEAKING
by Lee Weinstein and Darrell Schweitzer

Mr. Weinstein (age 31, M.S. in Biology) and Mr. Schweitzer (age 26, M.A. in English) both help your editor cope with the perils of manuscript reading for IA'sf. *Sometimes such rigors prove too much even for the greatest minds (not to mention those of Weinstein & Schweitzer), and in resulting moments of weakness they perpetrate something horrid, like the following story. This is Mr. Weinstein's first science fiction sale.*

Susan Kendell hurried through the crowded lobby of the Bethair Institute for Biomedical Research. She swerved to avoid an Oriental woman wearing a feminist insignia who was talking to a reporter and nearly collided with a black couple carrying placards. She took the stairs to the second floor, pushed open a door marked **DIRECTOR**, and found her fiancé, Dr. Jeffrey Barker, pacing the laboratory floor nervously.

"Jeff, what is going on down there? It looks like the UN is having a confrontation in the lobby."

"No, it's a madhouse. A genuine madhouse. Reverend Sun plans to send over a busload of his people, and there's the Vegetarian Congress, and Pope George Ringo sent an emissary. In twenty minutes I'm going to have to address that mob in the meeting room. Out of the thousands of applications which have gotten through the *first* screening, I have to pick the first human subject to be cloned. Whoever I choose will go down in history. No matter who I pick, I'll be attacked for favoritism. Every minority, every majority, every *every*body wants the honor. And then there's the press to deal with. How do I decide?"

She pulled out a stool and sat down. "Once the first one takes, the others should follow very closely. They'll all be 'first' in a sense."

"I'm sure the second man to fly the Atlantic solo followed 'very closely.' But can anyone remember his name?"

"I see. Have you thoroughly checked their genetic backgrounds?"

"Yes, and they're all as perfect as human beings can be. I could draw a name out of a hat, but a lot of groups aren't going to sit still

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and be passed over because of the vagaries of chance. If only I had some solid objective criterion to work from."

He sat down wearily on another stool, and both were silent for a moment. Then she spoke.

"Maybe you're approaching it wrong. This is an added luxury, right? All those people can have babies the ordinary way, maybe even identical twins, which are nothing but natural clones in the first place. What about someone who can't? It's like deciding who gets a second helping when a lot of people haven't been fed yet."

"*That's it!*" he exclaimed, brushing a heap of papers off a desk into a wastebasket. "Sue, you've saved my day."

"I did?" she said as she followed him out.

A dozen flashbulbs went off as Dr. Barker walked into the meeting room. On cue, he went to the front of the room, took the microphone, and waited for quiet.

"In a few minutes," he said, "I'll give you a short history of this project. But before that, I should like to explain how the volunteer to provide the genetic material for the first attempt at human cloning will be chosen. I have given this a great deal of thought, and I believe I have come up with an equitable solution." He cleared his throat. A murmur rose from the crowd, then died down.

"The real credit for this should go to my fiancée, Miss Sue Kendall, who gave me the added insight I needed. The subject for the experiment will be chosen on the basis of two things: first, contrary to those out there who would have us believe that scientists are as unfeeling as the glass in their test tubes, we are interested in the welfare of the child. The first clone baby will have unprecedented problems in adjustment. Therefore we need someone who can devote his or her full time to the upbringing of the clone. An institutional or large family situation, in which the child might be neglected or overshadowed by others, is obviously not desirable. Secondly, there's the matter of who *needs* cloning instead of who just *wants* it for the novelty. I think most of you are capable of having children in the time-honored fashion."

He paused while the snickering subsided, then continued.

"The first 'parent' of a clone must be someone who is genetically sound, but incapable of having offspring, either because of age or accidental sterilization. And it should be someone who has no living relatives and needs this child of science to continue his or her line. And so, ladies and gentlemen, I thought it only fair that he among you who is without kin grow the first clone."

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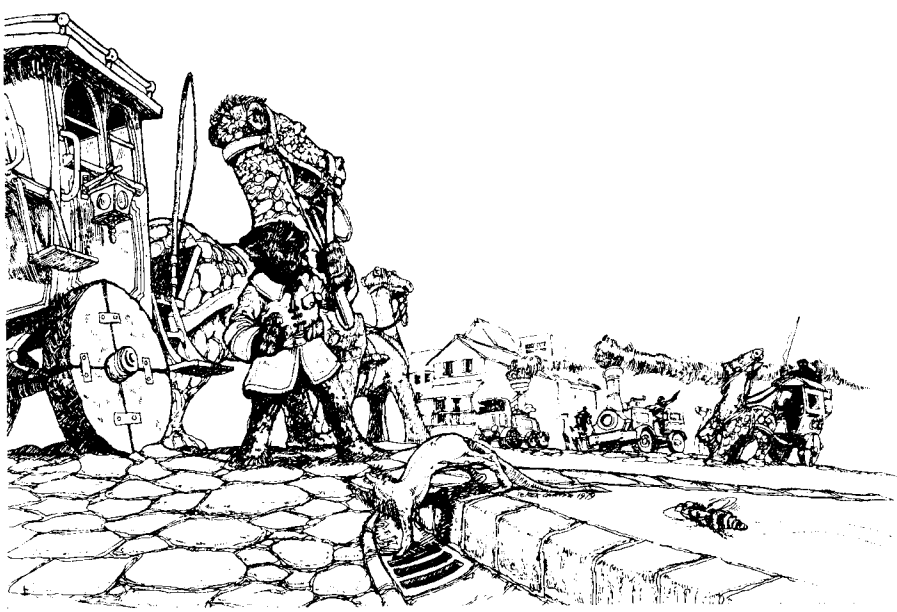
GRIMES AND THE GREAT RACE

by A. Bertram Chandler

art: Derek Carter

Here's another in Captain Chandler's stories of the Rim Worlds—this from a series of Commodore Grimes's reminiscences of his days in the Survey Service. . . .



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"I didn't think that I'd be seeing you again," said Grimes.

"Or I you," Kitty Kelly told him. "But Station Yorick's customers liked that first interview. The grizzled old spacedog, pipe in mouth, glass in hand, spinning a yarn. . . . So when my bosses learned that you're stuck here until your engineers manage to fit a new rubber band to your inertial drive they said, in these very words, 'Get your arse down to the spaceport, Kitty, and try to wheedle another tall tale out of the old bastard!' "

"Mphm," grunted Grimes, acutely conscious that his prominent ears had reddened angrily.

Kitty smiled sweetly. She was an attractive girl, black Irish, wide-mouthed, creamy-skinned, with vivid blue eyes. Grimes would have thought her much more attractive had she not been making it obvious that she still nursed the resentment engendered by his first story, a tale of odd happenings at long-ago and far-away Glenrowan where, thanks to Grimes, an ancestral Kelly had met his downfall.

She said tartly, "And lay off the Irish this time, will you?"

Grimes looked at her, at her translucent, emerald green blouse that concealed little, at the long, shapely legs under the skirt that concealed even less. He thought, *There's one of the Irish, right here, that I'd like to lay on.*

With deliberate awkwardness he asked, "If I'm supposed to avoid giving offense to anybody—and you Elsinoreans must carry the blood of about every race and nation on Old Earth—what can I talk about?"

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She made a great show of cogitation, frowning, staring down at the tips of her glossy green shoes. Then she smiled. "Racing, of course! On this world we're great followers of the horses." She frowned again. "But no. Somehow I just can't see you as a sporting man, Commodore."

"As a matter of fact," said Grimes stiffly, "I did once take part in a race. And for high stakes."

"I just can't imagine *you* on a horse."

"Who said anything about horses?"

"What were you riding, then?"

"Do you want the story or don't you? If I'm going to tell it, I'll tell it my way."

She sighed, muttered, "All right, all right." She opened her case, brought out the trivi recorder, set it up on the deck of the day cabin. She aimed one lens at the chair in which Grimes was sitting, the other at the one that she would occupy. She squinted into the viewfinder. "Pipe in mouth," she ordered. "Glass in hand . . . Where is the glass, Commodore? And aren't you going to offer *me* a drink?"

He gestured towards the liquor cabinet. "You fix it. I'll have a pink gin, on the rocks."

"Then I'll have the same. It'll be better than the sickly muck you poured down me last time I was aboard your ship!"

Grimes's ears flushed again. The "sickly muck" had failed to have the desired effect.

My first command in the Survey Service [he began] was of a Serpent Class Courier, *Adder*. The captains of these little ships were lieutenants, their officers lieutenants and ensigns. There were no petty officers or ratings to worry about, no stewards or stewardesses to look after us. We made our own beds, cooked our own meals. We used to take turns playing with the rather primitive autochef. We didn't starve; in fact we lived quite well.

There was some passenger accommodation; the couriers were—and probably still are—sometimes used to get VIPs from Point A to Point B in a hurry. And they carried Service mail and despatches hither and yon. If there was any odd job to do we did it.

This particular job was a very odd one. You've heard of Darban? No? Well, it's an Earth-type planet in the Tauran Sector. Quite a pleasant world although the atmosphere's a bit too dense for some tastes. But if it were what we call Earth-normal I mightn't be sitting here talking to you now. Darban's within the Terran sphere of influence with a Carlotti Beacon Station, a Survey Service Base, and

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all the rest of it. At the time of which I'm talking, though, it wasn't in anybody's sphere of influence, although Terran star tramps and Hallichek and Shaara ships had been calling there for quite some time. There was quite a demand for the so-called living opals—although how any woman could bear to have a slimy, squirming necklace of luminous worms strung about her neck beats me!

She interrupted him. "These Hallicheki and Shaara . . . non-human races, aren't they?"

"Non-human and non-humanoid. The Hallicheki are avians, with a matriarchal society. The Shaara are winged arthropods, not unlike the Terran bees, although very much larger and with a somewhat different internal structure."

"There'll be pictures of them in our library. We'll show them to our viewers. But go on, please."

The merchant captains [he continued] had been an unusually law-abiding crowd. They'd bartered for the living opals but had been careful not to give in exchange any artifacts that would unduly accelerate local industrial evolution. No advanced technology—if the Darbanese wanted spaceships they'd have to work out for themselves how to build them—and, above all, no sophisticated weaponry. Mind you, some of those skippers would have been quite capable of flogging a few hand lasers or the like to the natives but the Grand Governor of Barkara—the nation that, by its relatively early development of airships and firearms, had established *de facto* if not *de jure* sovereignty over the entire planet—made sure that nothing was imported that could be a threat to his rule. A situation rather analogous, perhaps, to that on Earth centuries ago when the Japanese Shoguns and their samurai took a dim view of the muskets and cannon that, in the wrong hands, would have meant their downfall.

Then the old Grand Governor died. His successor intimated that he would be willing to allow Darban to be drawn into the Federation of Worlds and to reap the benefits accruing therefrom. But whose Federation? Our Interstaller Federation? The Hallichek Hegemony? The Shaara Galactic Hive?

Our Intelligence people, just for once, started to earn their keep. According to them the Shaara had despatched a major warship to Darban, the captain of which had been given full authority to dicker with the Grand Governor. The Hallicheki had done likewise. And—not for the first time!—our lords and masters had been caught

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with their pants down. It was at the time of the Waverley Confrontation; and Lindisfarne Base, as a result, was right out of major warships. Even more fantastically the only spaceship available was my little *Adder*—and she was in the throes of a refit. Oh, there were ships at Scapa and Mikasa Bases but both of these were one helluva long way from Darban.

I was called before the Admiral and told that I must get off Lindisfarne as soon as possible, if not before, to make all possible speed for Darban, there to establish and maintain a Terran presence until such time as a senior officer could take over from me. I was to report on the actions of the Shaara and the Hallicheki. I was to avoid direct confrontation with either. And I was not, repeat not, to take any action at any time without direct authorisation from Base. I was told that a civilian linguistic expert would be travelling in *Adder*—a Miss Mary Marsden—and that she would be assisting me as required.

What rankled was the way in which the Admiral implied that he was being obliged to send a boy on a man's errand. And I wasn't at all happy about having Mary Marsden along. She was an attractive enough girl—what little one could see of her!—but she was a super wowser. She was a member of one of the more puritanical religious sects flourishing on Francisco—and Francisco, as you know, is a hotbed of freak religions. Mary took hers seriously. She had insisted on retaining her civilian status because she did not approve of the short-skirted uniforms in which the Survey Service clad its female personnel. She always wore long-skirted, long-sleeved, high-necked dresses and a bonnet over her auburn hair. She didn't smoke—not even tobacco—or drink anything stronger than milk.

And yet, as far as we could see, she was a very pretty girl. Eyes that were more green than any other colour. A pale—but not unhealthily so—skin. A straight nose that, a millimeter longer, would have been too big. A wide, full mouth that didn't need any artificial colouring. A firm, rather square chin. Good teeth—which she needed when it was the turn of Beadle, my first lieutenant, to do the cooking. Beadle had a passion for pies and his crusts always turned out like concrete. . . .

Well, we lifted off from Lindisfarne Base. We set trajectory for Darban. And before we were half-way there we suffered a complete communications black-out. Insofar as the Carlotti deep space radio was concerned I couldn't really blame Slovotny, my Sparks. The Base technicians, in their haste to get us off the premises, had botched the overhaul of the transceiver and, to make matters worse,

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hadn't replaced the spares they had used. When two circuit trays blew, that was that.

Spooky Deane, my psionic communications officer, I could and did blame for the shortcomings of *his* department. As you probably know, it's just not possible for even the most highly trained and talented telepath to transmit his thoughts across light years without an amplifier. The amplifier most commonly used is the brain of that highly telepathic animal, the Terran dog, removed from the skull of its hapless owner and kept alive in a tank of nutrient solution with all the necessary life-support systems. PCOs are lonely people; they're inclined to regard themselves as the only true humans in shiploads of sub-men. They make pets of their horrid amplifiers, to which they can talk telepathically. And—as lonely men do—they drink.

What happened aboard *Adder* was an all-too-frequent occurrence. The PCO would be going on a solitary bender and would get to the stage of wanting to share his bottle with his pet. When neat gin—or whatever—is poured into nutrient solution the results are invariably fatal to whatever it is that's being nourished.

So—no psionic amplifier. No Carlotti deep space radio. No contact with Base.

"And aren't you going to share your *bottle with* your *pet, Commodore?"*

"I didn't think that you were a pet of mine, Miss Kelly, or I of yours. But it's time we had a pause for refreshment."

We stood on for Darban [he continued]. Frankly, I was pleased rather than otherwise at being entirely on my own, knowing that now I would have to use my own initiative, that I would not have the Lord Commissioners of the Admiralty peering over my shoulder all the time, expecting me to ask their permission before I so much as blew my nose. Beadle, my first lieutenant, did try to persuade me to return to Lindisfarne—he was a very capable officer but far too inclined to regard Survey Service Regulations as Holy Writ. (I did find later that, given the right inducement, he was capable of bending those same regulations.) Nonetheless, he was, in many ways, rather a pain in the arse.

But Beadle was in the minority. The other young gentlemen were behind me, all in favour of carrying on. Mary Marsden, flaunting her civilian status, remained neutral.

We passed the time swotting up on Darban, watching and listen-

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ing to the tapes that had been put on board prior to our departure from Lindisfarne. We gained the impression of a very pleasant, almost Earth-type planet with flora and fauna not too outrageously different from what the likes of us are used to. Parallel evolution and all that. A humanoid—but not human—dominant race, furry bipeds that would have passed for cat-faced apes in a bad light. Civilized, with a level of technology roughly that of Earth during the late nineteenth century, old reckoning. Steam engines. Railways. Electricity, and the electric telegraph. Airships. Firearms. One nation—that with command of the air and a monopoly of telegraphic communications—*de facto* if not entirely *de jure* ruler of the entire planet.

The spaceport, such as it was, consisted of clearings in a big forest some kilometers south of Barkara, the capital city of Bandooran. Bandooran, of course, was the most highly developed nation, the one that imposed its will on all of Darban. Landing elsewhere was . . . discouraged. The Dog Star Line at one time tried to steal a march on the competition by instructing one of their captains to land near a city called Droobar, there to set up the Dog Star Line's own trading station. The news must have been telegraphed to Barkara almost immediately. A couple of dirigibles drifted over, laying H.E. and incendiary eggs on the city. The surviving city fathers begged the Dog Star line captain to take himself and his ship elsewhere. Also, according to our tapes, the Dog Star Line was heavily fined shortly thereafter by the High Council of the Interstellar Federation.

But the spaceport . . . just clearings, as I have said, in the forest. Local airships were used to pick up incoming cargo and to deliver the tanks of "living opals" to the spaceships. No Aerospace Control, of course, although there would be once a base and a Carlotti Beacon Station had been established. Incoming traffic just came in, unannounced. Unannounced officially, that is. As you know, the inertial drive is far from being the quietest machine ever devised by Man; everybody in Barkara and for kilometers around would know when a spaceship was dropping down.

And we dropped in, one fine, sunny morning. After one preliminary orbit we'd been able to identify Barkara without any diffi-

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culty. The forest was there, just where our charts said it should be. There were those odd, circular holes in the mass of greenery—the clearings. In two of them there was the glint of metal. As we lost altitude we were able to identify the Shaara vessel—it's odd (or is it?) how their ships always look like giant beehives—and a typical, Hallicheki oversized silver egg sitting in a sort of latticework eggcup.

We came in early; none of the Shaara or Hallicheki were yet out and about although the noise of our drive must have alerted them. I set *Adder* down as far as possible from the other two ships. From my control room I could just see the blunt bows of them above the treetops.

We went down to the wardroom for breakfast, leaving Slovotny to enjoy his meal in solitary state in the control room; he would let us know if anybody approached while we were eating. He buzzed down just as I'd reached the toast and marmalade stage. I went right up. But the local authorities hadn't yet condescended to take notice of us; the airship that came nosing over was a Shaara blimp, not a Darbanese rigid job. And then there was a flight of three Hallicheki, disdaining mechanical aids and using their own wings. One of the horrid things evacuated her bowels when she was almost overhead, making careful allowance for what little wind there was. It made a filthy splash all down one of my viewports.

At last the Darbanese came. Their ship was of the Zeppelin type, the fabric of the envelope stretched taut over a framework of wood or metal. It hovered over the clearing, its engines turning over just sufficiently to offset the effect of the breeze. That airship captain, I thought, knew his job. A cage detached itself from the gondola, was lowered rapidly to the ground. A figure jumped out of it just before it touched and the airship went up like a rocket after the loss of weight. I wondered what would happen if that cage fouled anything before it was rehoisted, but I needn't have worried. As I've said, the airship captain was an expert.

We went down to the after airlock. We passed through it, making the transition from our own atmosphere into something that, at first, felt like warm soup. But it was quite breathable. Mary Mars-

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den, as the linguist of the party, accompanied me down the ramp. I wondered how she could bear to go around muffled up to the eyebrows on such a beautiful morning as this; I was finding even shorts and shirt uniform too heavy for a warm day.

The native looked at us. We looked at him. He was dressed in a dull green smock that came down to mid-thigh and that left his arms bare. A fine collection of glittering brass badges was pinned to the breast and shoulders of his garment. He saluted, raising his three-fingered hands to shoulder level, palms out. His wide mouth opened in what I hoped was a smile, displaying pointed, yellow teeth that were in sharp contrast to the black fur covering his face.

He asked, in quite passable Standard English, "You the captain are?"

I said that I was.

He said, "Greetings I bring from the High Governor." Then, making a statement rather than asking a question, "You do not come in trade."

So we—or a Federation warship of some kind—had been expected. And *Adder,* little as she was, did not look like a merchantman—too many guns for too small a tonnage.

He went on, "So you are envoy. Same as—" He waved a hand in the general direction of where the other ships were berthed. "—the Shaara, the Hallicheki. Then you will please to attend the meeting that this morning has been arranged." He pulled a big, fat watch on a chain from one of his pockets. "In—in forty-five of your minutes from now."

While the exchange was taking place Mary was glowering a little. She was the linguistic expert and it was beginning to look as though her services would not be required. She listened quietly while arrangements were being made. We would proceed to the city in my boat, with the Governor's messenger acting as pilot—pilot in the marine sense of the word, that is, just giving me the benefit of his local knowledge.

We all went back on board *Adder.* The messenger assured me that there was no need for me to have internal pressure adjusted to his requirements; he had often been aboard outworld spaceships and, too, he was an airshipman.

I decided that there was no time for me to change into dress uniform so I compromised by pinning my miniatures—two good attendance medals and the Distinguished Conduct Star that I'd got after the Battle of Dartura—to the left breast of my shirt, buckling on my sword belt with the wedding cake cutter in its gold-braided

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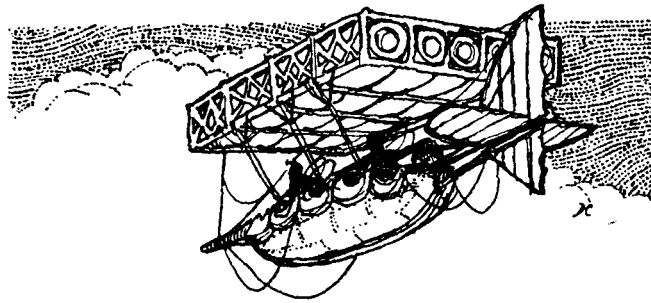

sheath. While I was tarting myself up, Mary entertained the messenger to coffee and biscuits in the wardroom (his English, she admitted to me later, was better than her Darbanese) and Beadle, with Dalgleish, the engineer, got the boat out of its bay and down to the ground by the ramp.

Mary was coming with me to the city and so was Spooky Deane—a trained telepath is often more useful than a linguist. We got into the boat. It was obvious that our new friend was used to this means of transportation, must often have ridden in the auxiliary craft of visiting merchant vessels. He sat beside me to give directions. Mary and Spooky were in the back.

As we flew towards the city—red brick, grey-roofed houses on the outskirts, tall, cylindrical towers, also of red brick, in the centre—we saw the Shaara and the Hallicheki ahead of us, flying in from their ships. A Queen-Captain, I thought, using my binoculars, with a princess and an escort of drones. A Hallichek Nest Leader accompanied by two old hens as scrawny and ugly as herself. The Shaara weren't using their blimp and the Hallicheki consider it beneath their dignity to employ mechanical means of flight inside an atmosphere. Which made *us* the wingless wonders.

I reduced speed a little to allow the opposition to make their landings on the flat roof of one of the tallest towers first. After all, they were both very senior to me, holding ranks equivalent to at least that of a four-ring captain in the Survey Service, and I was a mere lieutenant, my command notwithstanding. I came in slowly over the streets of the city. There were people abroad—pedestrians mainly, although there were vehicles drawn by scaly, huge-footed draught animals and the occasional steam car—and they raised their black-furred faces to stare at us. One or two of them waved.

When we got to the roof of the tower the Shaara and the Hallicheki had gone down but there were a half-dozen blue-smocked guards to

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receive us. They saluted as we disembarked. One of them led the way to a sort of penthouse which, as a matter of fact, merely provided cover for the stairhead. The stairs themselves were . . . wrong. They'd been designed, of course, to suit the length and jointure of the average Darbanese leg, which wasn't anything like ours. Luckily the Council Chamber was only two flights down.

It was a big room, oblong save for the curvature of the two end walls, in which were high windows. There was a huge, long table, at one end of which was a sort of ornate throne in which sat the High Governor. He was of far slighter stature than the majority of his compatriots but made up for it by the richness of his attire. His smock was of a crimson, velvetlike material and festooned with gold chains of office.

He remained seated but inclined his head in our direction. He said—I learned afterwards that these were the only words of English that he knew; he must have picked them up from some visiting space captain—"Come in. This is Liberty Hall; you can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard!"

I was wondering," said Kitty Kelly coldly, "just when you were going to get around to saying that."

"He said it, not me. But I have to use that greeting once in every story. It's one of my conditions of employment."

And where was I [he went on] before I was interrupted? Oh, yes. The Council Chamber, with the High Governor all dressed up like a Christmas tree. Various ministers and other notables, not as richly attired as their boss. All male, I found out later, with the exception of the Governor's lady, who was sitting on her husband's right. There were secondary sexual characteristics, of course, but so slight as to be unrecognisable by an outworlder. To me she—and I didn't know that she was "she"—was just another Darbanese.

But the fair sex was well represented. There was the Queen-Captain, her iridescent wings folded on her back, the velvety brown fur of her thorax almost concealed by the sparkling jewels that were her badges of high rank. There was the Shaara princess, less decorated but more elegant than her mistress. There was the Nest Leader; she was nowhere nearly as splendid as the Queen-Captain. She wasn't splendid at all. Her plumage was dun and dusty, the talons of the "hands" at the elbow joints of her wings unpolished. She wore no glittering insignia, only a wide band of cheap-looking yellow plastic about her scrawny neck. Yet she had her dignity, and

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her cruel beak was that of a bird of prey rather than that of the barnyard fowl she otherwise resembled. She was attended by two hen officers, equally drab.

And, of course, there was Mary, almost as drab as the Hallicheki.

The Governor launched into his spiel, speaking through an interpreter. I was pleased to discover that Standard English was to be the language used. It made sense, of course. English is the common language of Space just as it used to be the common language of the sea, back on Earth. And as the majority of the merchant vessels landing on Darban had been of Terran registry, the local merchants and officials had learned English.

The Governor, through his mouthpiece, said that he welcomed us all. He said that he was pleased that Imperial Earth had sent her representative, albeit belatedly, to this meeting of cultures. Blah, blah, blah. He agreed with the representatives of the Great Space-faring Powers that it was desirable for some sort of permanent base to be established on Darban. But . . . but whichever of us was given the privilege of taking up residence on his fair planet would have to prove capability to conform, to mix. . . . (By this time the interpreter was having trouble in getting the idea across but he managed somehow.) The Darbanese, the Governor told us, were a sporting people and in Barkara there was one sport preferred to all others. This was racing. It would be in keeping with Darbanese tradition if the Treaty were made with whichever of us proved the most expert in a competition of this nature. . . .

"Racing?" I whispered. In a foot race we'd probably be able to beat the Shaara and the Hallicheki, but I didn't think that it was foot racing that was implied. Horse racing or its local equivalent? That didn't seem right either.

"Balloon racing," muttered Spooky Deane, who had been flapping his psionic ears.

I just didn't see how ballon racing could be a spectator sport—but the tapes on Darban with which we had been supplied were far from comprehensive. As we soon found out.

"Ballon racing?" asked Kitty Kelly. "From the spectators' viewpoint it must have been like watching grass grow."

"This balloon racing certainly wasn't," Grimes told her.

The Darbanese racing balloons [he went on] were ingenious aircraft: dirigible, gravity-powered. Something very like them was, as a matter of fact, invented by a man called Adams back on Earth in

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the nineteenth century. Although it performed successfully, the Adams airship never got off the ground, commercially speaking. But it did work. The idea was that the thing would progress by soaring and swooping, soaring and swooping. The envelope containing the gas cells was a planing surface and the altitude of the contraption was controlled by the shifting of weights in the car—ballast, the bodies of the crew. Initially, positive buoyancy was obtained by the dumping of ballast and the thing would plane upwards. Then, when gas was valved, there would be negative buoyancy and a glide downwards. Sooner or later, of course, you'd be out of gas to valve or ballast to dump. That would be the end of the penny section.

I remembered about the Adams airship while the interpreter did his best to explain balloon racing to us. I thought that it was a beautiful case of parallel mechanical evolution on two worlds many light years apart.

The Queen-Captain got the drift of it quite soon—after all, the Shaara *know* airships. Her agreement, even though it was made through her artificial voice box, sounded more enthusiastic than otherwise. The Nest Leader took her time making up her mind but finally squawked yes. I would have been outvoted if I hadn't wanted to take part in the contest.

There was a party then, complete with drinks and sweet and savoury things to nibble. The Shaara made pigs of themselves on a sticky liqueur and candy. Spooky Deane got stuck into something rather like gin. I found a sort of beer that wasn't too bad—although it was served unchilled—with little, spicy sausages as blotting paper. Mary, although she seemed to enjoy the sweetmeats, would drink only water. Obviously our hosts thought that she was odd, almost as odd as the Hallicheki who, although drinking water, would eat nothing.

They're *nasty* people, those avians. They have no redeeming vices—and when it comes to *real* vices their main one is cruelty. *Their* idea of a banquet is a shrieking squabble over a table loaded with little mammals, alive but not kicking—they're hamstrung before the feast so that they can't fight or run away—which they tear to pieces with those beaks of theirs.

After quite a while the party broke up. The Nest Leader and her officers were the first to leave, anxious no doubt to fly back to their ship for a tasty dish of live worms. The Queen-Captain and her party were the next to go. They were in rather a bad way. They were still on the rooftop when Mary and I, supporting him between us, managed to get Spooky Deane up the stairs and to the boat.

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None of the locals offered to help us; it is considered bad manners on Darban to draw the attention of a guest to his insobriety.

We said our goodbyes to those officials, including the interpreter, who had come to see us off. We clambered into our boat and lifted. On our way back to *Adder* we saw the Shaara blimp coming to pick up the Queen-Captain. I wasn't surprised. If she'd tried to take off from the roof in the state that she was in she'd have made a nasty splash on the cobblestones under the tower.

And I wasn't at all sorry to get back to the ship to have a good snore. Spooky was fast asleep by the time that I landed by the after airlock and Mary was looking at both of us with great distaste.

"I'm *not a wowser," said Kitty Kelly.*
"Help yourself, then. And freshen my glass while you're about it."

Bright and early the next morning [he went on, after a refreshing sip] two racing balloons and an instructor were delivered by a small rigid airship. Our trainer was a young native called Robiliyi. He spoke very good English; as a matter of fact he was a student at the University of Barkara and studying for a degree in Outworld Languages. He was also a famous amateur balloon jockey and had won several prizes. Under his supervision we assembled one of the balloons, inflating it from the cylinders of hydrogen that had been brought from the city. Imagine a huge air mattress with a flimsy, wickerwork car slung under it. That's what the thing looked like. The only control surface was a huge rudder at the after end of the car. There were two tillers—one forward and one aft.

Dalgleish inspected the aircraft, which was moored by lines secured to metal pegs driven into the ground. He said, "I'm not happy about all this valving of gas. You know how the Shaara control buoyancy in their blimps?"

I said that I did.

He said that it should be possible to modify one of the balloons—the one that we should use for the race itself—so as to obviate the necessity of valving gas for the downward glide. I prodded the envelope with a cautious finger and said that I didn't think that the fabric of the gas cells would stand the strain of being compressed in a net. He said that he didn't think so either. *So that was that,* I thought. *Too bad.* Then he went on to tell me that in the ship's stores was a bolt of plastic cloth that, a long time ago, had been part of an urgent shipment of supplies to the Survey Service base on Zephyria, a world notorious for its violent windstorms. (Whoever

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named that planet had a warped sense of humour!) The material was intended for making emergency repairs to the domes housing the base facilities. They were always being punctured by wind-borne boulders and the like. When *Adder* got to Zephyria it was found that somebody had experienced a long overdue rush of brains to the head and put everything underground. There had been the usual lack of liaison between departments and nobody had been told not to load the plastic.

Anyhow, Dalgleish thought that he'd be able to make gas cells from the stuff. He added that the Shaara would almost certainly be modifying their own racer, using the extremely tough silk from which the gas cells of their blimps were made.

I asked Robiliyi's opinion. He told me that it would be quite in order to use machinery as long as it was hand-powered.

Dalgleish went into a huddle with him. They decided that only the three central, sausage-like gas cells need be compressed to produce negative buoyancy; also that it would be advisable to replace the wickerwork frame enclosing the "mattress" with one of light but rigid metal. Too, it would be necessary to put a sheet of the plastic over the assembly of gas cells so as to maintain a planing surface in all conditions.

Then it was time for my first lesson. Leaving Dalgleish and the others to putter around with the still unassembled balloon I followed Robiliyi into the flimsy car of the one that was ready for use. The wickerwork creaked under my weight. I sat down, very carefully, amidships, and tried to keep out of the way. Robiliyi started scooping sand out of one of the ballast bags, dropping it overside. The bottom of the car lifted off the mossy ground but the balloon was still held down by the mooring lines, two forward and two aft. Robiliyi scampered, catlike, from one end of the car to the other, pulling the metal pegs clear of the soil with expert jerks. We lifted, rising vertically. I looked down at the faces of my shipmates. *Better him than us,* their expressions seemed to be saying.

Then we were at treetop height, then above the trees, still lifting. Robiliyi scrambled to the rear of the craft, calling me to follow. He grabbed the after tiller. The platform tilted and above us the raft of gas cells did likewise, presenting an inclined plane to the air. We were sliding through the atmosphere at a steep angle. I wasn't sure whether or not I was enjoying the experience. I'd always liked ballooning, back on Earth, but the gondolas of the hot air balloons in which I'd flown were far safer than this flimsy basket. There was nothing resembling an altimeter in the car; there were no instru-

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ments at all. I hoped that somewhere in the nested gas cells there was a relief valve that would function if we got too high. And how high was too high, anyhow? I noticed that the underskin of the balloon, which had been wrinkled when we lifted off, was now taut.

Robiliyi shouted shrilly, "Front end! Front end!" We scuttled forward. He pulled on a dangling lanyard; there was an audible hiss of escaping gas from above. He put the front-end tiller over and as we swooped downward we turned. The treetops, which had seemed far too distant, were now dangerously close. And there was the clearing from which we had lifted with *Adder* standing there, bright silver in the sunlight. But we weren't landing yet. We shifted weight aft, jettisoned ballast, soared. I was beginning to get the hang of it, starting to enjoy myself. Robiliyi let me take the tiller so that I could get the feel of the airship. She handled surprisingly well.

We did not return to earth until we had dumped all our ballast. I asked Robiliyi what we could do if, for some reason, we wanted to get upstairs again in a hurry after valving gas. He grinned, stripped off his tunic, made as though to throw it overboard. He grinned again, showing all his sharp, yellow teeth. "And if *that* is not enough," he said, "there is always your crew person. . . ."

We landed shortly after this. Robiliyi reinflated the depleted cells from one of the bottles while Beadle and Spooky collected ballast sand from the banks of a nearby brook.

Then it was Mary's turn to start her training.

"Mary? Was she *your crew, your co-pilot, for the race?"*

"Yes."

"But you've impressed me as being a male chauvinist pig."

"Have I? Well, frankly, I'd sooner have had one of my officers. But Mary volunteered, and she was far better qualified than any of them. Apart from myself she was the only one in Adder with lighter-than-air experience. It seems that the sect of which she was a member went in for ballooning quite a lot. It tied in somehow with their religion. Nearer my God to Thee, and all that."

Well [he went on], we trained, both in the balloon that Dalgleish had modified and in the one that was still as it had been when delivered to us. The modifications? Oh, quite simple. A coffee-mill hand winch, an arrangement of webbing that compressed the three central, longitudinal gas cells. The modified balloon we exercised secretly, flying it only over a circuit that was similar in many ways to the official, triangular race track. The unmodified balloon we flew

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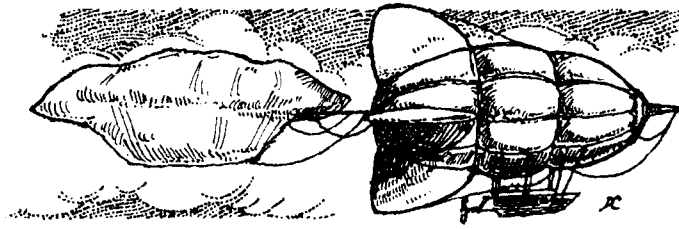

over the actual course. The Shaara and the Hallicheki did likewise, in craft that did not appear to have had anything done to them. I strongly suspected that they were doing the same as we were, keeping their dark horses out of sight until the Big Day. The Shaara, I was certain, had done to theirs what we had done to ours—after all, it was a Shaara idea that we had borrowed. But the Hallicheki? We just couldn't guess.

And we trained, and we trained. At first it was Robiliyi with Mary or Robiliyi with myself. Then it was Mary and I. I'll say this for her—she made good balloon crew. And I kidded myself that she was becoming far less untouchable. In that narrow car we just couldn't help coming into physical contact quite frequently.

Then the time was upon us and we were as ready as ever we would be. On the eve of the Great Day the three contending balloons were taken to the airport. The Shaara towed theirs in behind one of their blimps; it was entirely concealed in a sort of gauzy cocoon. The Hallicheki towed theirs in, four hefty crew hens doing the work. There was no attempt at concealment. We towed ours in astern of our flier. It was completely swathed in a sheet of light plastic.

The racers were maneuvered into a big hangar to be inspected by the judges. I heard later, from Robiliyi, that the Nest Leader had insinuated that the Shaara and ourselves had installed miniature inertial drive units disguised as hand winches. (It was the sort of thing that *they* would have done if they'd thought that they could get away with it.)

We all returned to our ships. I don't know how the Shaara and the Hallicheki spent the night but we dined and turned in early. I took a stiff nightcap to help me to sleep. Mary had her usual warm milk.

The next morning we returned in the flier to the airport. It was already a warm day. I was wearing a shirt-and-shorts uniform but intended to discard cap, long socks, and shoes before clambering into the wickerwork car of the balloon. Mary was suitably—according

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to her odd lights—dressed but what she had on was very little more revealing than her usual high-necked, longsleeved, long-skirted dress; it did little more than establish the fact that she was, after all, a biped. It was a hooded, long-sleeved cover-all suit with its legs terminating in soft shoes. It was so padded that it was quite impossible to do more than guess at the shape of the body under it.

Young Robiliyi was waiting for us at the airport, standing guard over our green and gold racer. Close by was the Shaara entry, its envelope displaying orange polka dots on a blue ground. The Shaara crew stood by their balloon—the pilot, a bejewelled drone, and his crew, a husky worker. Then there were the Hallicheki—officers both, to judge from the yellow plastic bands about their scrawny necks. The envelope of their racer was a dull brown.

On a stand, some distance from the starting line, sat the Governor with his entourage. With him were the Queen-Captain and the Nest Leader with their senior officers. The judges were already aboard the small, rigid airship which, at its mooring mast, was ready to cast off as soon as the race started. It would fly over the course with us, its people alert for any infraction of the rules.

Two of the airport ground crew wheeled out a carriage on which was mounted a highly polished little brass cannon. The starting gun. I kicked off my shoes, peeled off my socks, left them, with my cap, in Robiliyi's charge. I climbed into the flimsy car, took my place at the after tiller. Mary followed me, stationed herself at the winch amidships. She released the brake. The gas cells rustled as they expanded; we were held down now only by the taut mooring lines fore and aft. I looked over at the others. The Shaara, too, were ready. The Hallicheki had just finished the initial dumping of sand ballast.

One of the gunners jerked a long lanyard. There was a bang and a great flash of orange flame, a cloud of dirty white smoke. I yanked the two after mooring lines, pulling free the iron pegs. Forward Mary did the same, a fraction of a second later. It wasn't a good start. The forward moorings should have been released first to get our leading edge starting to lift. Mary scrambled aft, redistributing weight, but the Shaara and the Hallicheki, planing upwards with slowly increasing speed, were already ahead.

Almost directly beneath us was Airport Road and in the middle distance was the railway to Brinn with the Brinn Highway running parallel to it. I can remember how the track was gleaming like silver in the morning sunlight. To the north, distant but already below the expanding horizon, was the Cardan Knoll, a remarkable dome-shaped hill with lesser domes grouped about it. We would have to

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pass to the west and north of this before steering a south-easterly course for the Porgidor Tower.

Shaara and Hallicheki were racing neck and neck, still climbing. I was still falling behind. I brought the dangling mooring lines inboard to reduce drag. It may have made a little difference, but not much. Ahead of us the Shaara balloon reached its ceiling, compressed gas and began the first downward glide. A second or so later the Hallicheki reduced buoyancy to follow suit. I looked up. The underskin of my gas cells was still slightly wrinkled; there was still climbing to do.

The last wrinkles vanished. I told Mary to compress. The pawls clicked loudly as she turned the winch handle. Then we scuttled to the front end of the car. I took hold of the forward tiller. We swooped down, gathering speed rapidly. The farm buildings and the grazing animals in the fields were less and less toylike as we lost altitude. I steered straight for an ungainly beast that looked like an armour-plated cow. It lifted its head to stare at us in stupid amazement.

I didn't want to hit the thing. I sort of half ran, half crawled aft as Mary released the winch brake. We lifted sweetly—no doubt to the great relief of the bewildered herbivore. I looked ahead. The opposition were well into their second upward beat, the Hallicheki soaring more steeply than the Shaara. But taking advantage of thermals is an art that every bird learns as soon as it is able to fly; there must be, I thought, a considerable updraught of warm air from the railroad and the black-surfaced Brinn Highway. But the higher the Hallicheki went the more gas they would have to valve, and if they were not careful they would lose all their reserve buoyancy before the circuit was completed.

The Shaara reached their ceiling and started their downward glide. The Hallicheki were still lifting, gaining altitude but losing ground. I couldn't understand why they were not gliding down their lift. And I was still lifting. Then I saw that, ahead, the Hallicheki had at last valved gas and were dropping. I pulled to starboard to avoid them. It meant putting on some distance but I daren't risk a mid-air collision. The Hallicheki had wings of their own and could bail out in safety. Mary and I hadn't and couldn't.

But there was no danger of our becoming entangled with the Hallicheki. They had put on considerable speed during their dive and were swooping down on the Shaara balloon like a hawk on its prey. They were directly above it—and then, although they were still well clear of the ground, were rising again. A failure of nerve? It didn't fit in with what I knew of their psychology. But ballast

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must have been dumped and it would mean an additional soar and swoop for them before rounding the Cardan Knoll.

And I was gaining on them.

But where were the Shaara?

Mary seemed to have read my thought. She said, "They're in trouble."

I looked down to where she was pointing. Yes, they were in trouble all right. They had lost considerable altitude and the car of their balloon was entangled with the topmost branches of a tall tree. The drone and the worker were tugging ineffectually with all their limbs, buzzing about it. But they would never get it clear. They'd lost all their lift. The sausage-like gas cells were limp, more than half deflated.

But that was their worry. We flew on. Ahead, the Knoll was getting closer. I pulled over to port to pass to the west'ard of the brush-covered domes. The Hallicheki were already rounding the Knoll, lost briefly to sight as they passed to north of it. Then I was coming round to starboard in a tight, rising turn. I didn't realise until it was almsot too late that the slight, northerly breeze was setting me down onto the hill; I had to put the tiller hard over to try to claw to wind'ard. The deck of our car just brushed the branches of a tree and there was a clattering, screeching explosion of small, flying reptiles from the foliage. Luckily they were more scared of us than we were of them.

Ahead, now, was the railway to Garardan and the Garardan Road. Beyond road and railway was the Blord River and, far to the south-east, I could see the crumbling stonework of the Porgidor Tower. Over road and railway, I reasoned, there would be thermals but over the river, which ran ice-cold from the high hills, there would be a downdraught. . . . Yes, there were thermals all right. The Hallicheki were taking full advantage of them, going up like a balloon. Literally. What were they playing at? Why weren't they gliding down the lift? And they were keeping well to starboard, to the south'ard of the track, putting on distance as they would have to come to port to pass to north and east of the tower.

I looked astern. The judges' airship was following, watching. If the Hallicheki tried to cut off a corner they'd be disqualified.

I kept the Porgidor Tower fine on my starboard bow; whatever the Hallicheki were playing at, *I* would run the minimum distance. And then, as I was lifting on the thermals over the railway, I saw that there was some method in the opposition's madness. There were more thermals over the power station on the west bank of the river

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and I had missed out on them.

Swoop and soar, swoop and soar. Compress, decompress. Our muscles were aching with the stooped scrambles forward and aft in the cramped confines of the car. It must have been even worse for Mary than for me because of the absurdly bulky and heavy clothing that she was wearing. But we were holding our own, more than holding our own. That thermal-hunting had cost the Hallicheki their lead.

Then there was the Porgidor Tower close on our starboard hand, with quite a crowd of spectators waving from the battered battlements. And we were on the last leg of the course, over boulder-strewn bushland, with the twin ribbons of the Saarkaar Road and Railway ahead and beyond them the river again, and beyond that the mooring masts and hangars of the airport.

Swoop and soar, swoop and soar. . . .

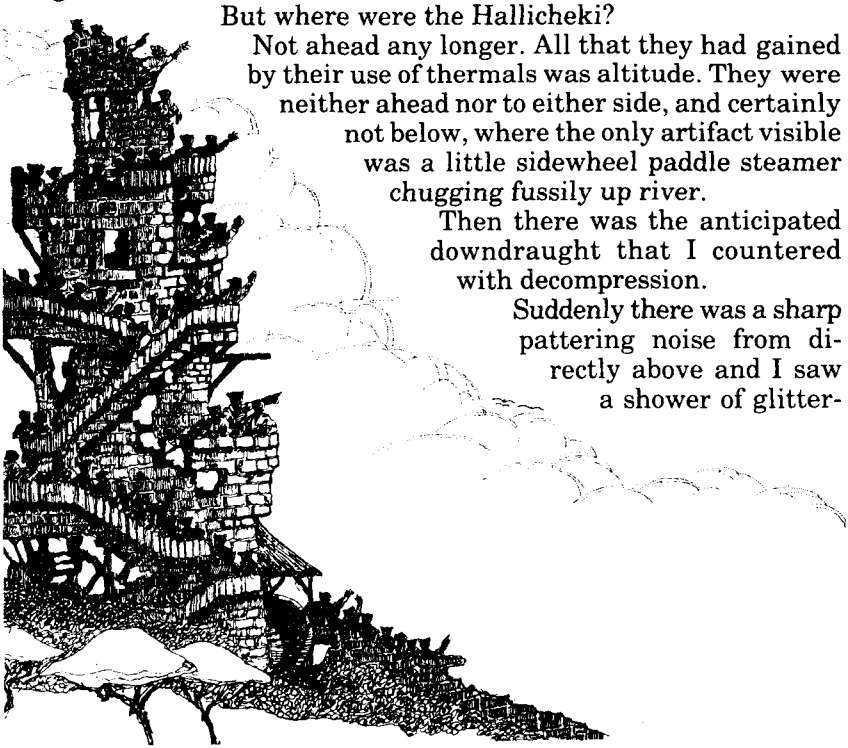
I swooped into the thermals rising from the road and the railway so that I could manage a steep, fast glide with no loss of altitude. I began to feel smugly self-congratulatory.

But where were the Hallicheki?

Not ahead any longer. All that they had gained by their use of thermals was altitude. They were neither ahead nor to either side, and certainly not below, where the only artifact visible was a little sidewheel paddle steamer chugging fussily up river.

Then there was the anticipated downdraught that I countered with decompression.

Suddenly there was a sharp pattering noise from directly above and I saw a shower of glitter-



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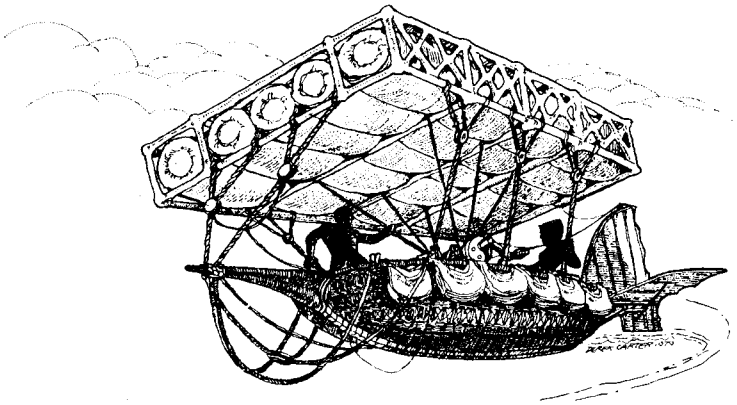

ing particles driving down on each side of the car. Rain? Hail? But neither fall from a clear sky.

Mary was quicker on the uptake than I was "The Hallicheki," she shouted. "They dumped their ballast on us!"

Not only had they dumped ballast on us, they'd holed the gas cells. Some of the viciously pointed steel darts had gone through every surface, dropping to the deck of the car. If we'd been in the way of them they'd have gone through us too. Razor-sharp, tungsten tipped (as I discovered later). So this was what had happened to the Shaara racer. . . .

"Ballast!" I yelled. "Dump ballast!"

But we didn't have any to dump. I thought briefly of the mooring lines with their metal pegs but the ropes were spliced to the pins and to the structure of the car. And I didn't have a knife. (All right, all right, I should have had one but I'd forgotten it.) Then I remembered my first flight with Robiliyi and what he had told me when I'd asked him what to do when there was no ballast left to dump. I stripped off my shirt, dropped it over the side. It didn't seem to make much difference. I sacrificed my shorts. I looked up. All the cells were punctured and three of them looked as though they were empty. But the planing surface above them must still be reasonably intact. I hoped. If only I could gain enough altitude I could glide home. Forgetting the company that I was in I took off my briefs, sent the scrap of fabric after the other garments.

I heard Mary make a noise

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half way bewteen a scream and a gasp.

I looked at her. She looked at me. Her face was one huge blush. I felt my own ears burning in sympathy.

I said, "We're still dropping. We have to get upstairs. Fast."

She asked, "You mean . . . ?"

I said, "Yes."

She asked, her voice little more than a whisper, "Must I?"

I said that she must.

But you could have knocked me over with a feather when her hand went to the throat of her coveralls, when her finger ran down the sealseam She stepped out of the garment, kicked it overside. Her underwear was thick and revealed little; nonetheless I could see that that fantastic blush of hers suffused the skin of her neck and shoulders, even the narrow strip of belly that was visible. *That will do,* I was going to say, but she gave me no time to say it. Her expression had me baffled. Her halter came off and was jettisoned, then her remaining garment.

I'll be frank. She wouldn't have attracted a second glance on a nudist beach; her figure was good but not outstanding. But this was not a nudist beach. A naked woman in an incongruous situation is so much more naked than she would be in the right surroundings.

She looked at me steadily, defiantly. Her blush had faded. Her skin was smoothly creamy rather than white. I felt myself becoming interested.

She asked, "Do you like it?" I thought at first that she meant the strip show that she had put on for me. She went on, "*I* do! I've often thought about it but I had no idea what it would really be like! The feel of the sun and the air on my skin . . . "

I wanted to go on looking at her. I wanted to do more than that—but there's a time and a place for everything and this was neither. It could have been quite a good place in other circumstances but not with a race to be flown to a finish.

I tore my eyes away from her naked body—I heard a ripping noise, but it was only one of the rents in the envelope enlarging itself—and looked around and up and down to see what was happening. Mary's supreme sacrifice was bringing results. We were lifting—sluggishly, but lifting. And so, just ahead of us, were the Hallicheki. The gas cells of their balloon were flabby and wrinkled; they must have squandered buoyancy recklessly in their attacks on the Shaara and ourselves. And then I saw one of the great, ugly brutes clambering out of the car. They were abandoning ship, I thought. They were dropping out of the race. Then I realised what they were doing. The

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one who had gone outboard was gripping the forward rail of the car with her feet, was beating her wings powerfully, towing the balloon. Legal or illegal? I didn't know. That would be for the judges to decide, just as they would have to make a decision on the use of potentially lethal ballast. But as no machinery was being used, the Hallicheki might be declared the winners of the race.

What else did we have to dump? We would have to gain altitude, and fast, for the last swoop in. The hand winch? It was of no further use to us. It was held down to the deck of the car only by wing nuts and they loosened fairly easily. We unscrewed them, threw them out. We were rising a little faster. Then there were the shackles securing the downhaul to the compression webbing. Overboard they went. The winch itself I decided to keep as a last reserve of disposable ballast.

High enough?

I thought so.

I valved gas—for the first and only time during our flight—and Mary and I shifted our weight forward. We swooped, overtaking the crawling, under tow, Hallicheki balloon. We were making headway all right but losing too much altitude. The winch would have to go.

It was insinuated that my jettisoning it when we were directly above the Hallicheki was an act of spite. I said in my report that it was accidental, that the Hallicheki just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or the right time. I'll not deny that we cheered when we saw the hunk of machinery hit that great, flabby mattress almost dead centre. It tore through it, rupturing at least four of the gas cells. The envelope crumpled, fell in about itself. The two hen officers struggled to keep the crippled racer in the air, ripping the balloon fabric to shreds with their clawed feet as their wings flapped frenziedly. Meanwhile *we* were going up like a rocket.

The Hallicheki gave up the attempt to keep their craft airborne. They let it flutter earthwards, trailing streamers of ragged cloth. They started to come after us, climbing powerfully. I could sense somehow that they were in a vile temper. I imagined those sharp claws and beaks ripping into the fabric of our balloon and didn't feel at all happy. *We* didn't have wings of our own. We didn't even have parachutes.

It was time for the final swoop—if only those blasted birds let us make it. There was no need to valve any more gas; the rents in the fabric of the gas cells had enlarged themselves. We shifted our weight forward. Astern and overhead I heard the throbbing of engines; it was the judges' airship escorting us to the finish line. The

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Hallicheki wouldn't dare to try anything now. I hoped. My hope was realized. They squawked loudly and viciously, sheered off.

Overhead, as I've said, there was the throbbing of airship engines—and, fainter, the irregular beat of an inertial drive unit. *Adder*'s atmosphere flier, I thought at first, standing by in case of accidents. But it didn't sound quite right, somehow. Too deep a note. But I'd too much on my plate to be able to devote any thought to matters of no immediate importance.

We swept into the airport, steering for the red flag on the apron that marked the finish. We were more of a hang glider now than a balloon but I *knew* somehow that we'd make it. The underside of the car brushed the branches of a tree—to have made a detour would have been out of the question—and a large section of decking was torn away. That gave us just the little extra buoyancy that we needed. We cleared the spiky hedge that marked the airport boundary. We actually hit the flagpole before we hit the ground, knocking it over. Before the tattered, deflated envelope collapsed over us completely we heard the cries of applause, the thunder of flat hands on thighs.

It was quite a job getting out from under that smothering fabric. During the struggle we came into contact, very close contact. At least once I almost . . . Well, I didn't. I'm not boasting about it, my alleged self-control, I mean. There comes a time in life when you feel more remorse for the uncommitted sins—if sins they are—than for the committed ones.

At last we crawled out of the wreckage. The first thing we noticed was that the applause had ceased. My first thought was that the natives were shocked by our nudity and then, as I looked around, saw that they were all staring upwards. The clangour of the strange inertial drive was sounding louder and louder.

We looked up too. There was a pinnace—a big pinnace, such as are carried by major warships—coming down. It displayed Survey Service markings. I could read the name, in large letters, ARIES II. *Aries'* number-two pinnace . . . *Aries*—a Constellation Class cruiser—I knew quite well. I'd once served in her as a junior watchkeeper. She must still be in orbit, I thought. This would be the preliminary landing party.

The pinnace grounded not far from where Mary and I were standing. Or where *I* was standing; Mary was on her hands and knees desperately trying to tear off a strip of fabric from the ruined envelope to cover herself. The outer airlock door opened. A group of officers in full dress blues disembarked. Captain Daintree was in

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the lead. I knew him. He was a strict disciplinarian, a martinet. He was one of the reasons why I had not been sorry to leave *Aries*.

He glared at us. He recognised me in spite of my non-regulation attire. He stood there, stiff as a ramrod, his right hand on the pommel of his dress sword. I still think that he'd have loved to use that weapon on me. His face registered shock, disbelief, horror, you name it.

He spoke at last, his voice low but carrying easily over the distance between us.

"Mr. Grimes, correct me if I am wrong, but your instructions, I believe, were merely to maintain a Terran presence on this planet until such time as an officer of higher rank could take over."

I admitted that this was so.

"You were not, I am certain, authorised to start a nudist club. Or is this, perhaps, some sort of love-in?"

"But, sir," I blurted, "I won the race!" Even he could not take that triumph from me. "I won the race!"

"And did you win the prize, Commodore?" asked Kitty Kelly.

"Oh, yes. A very nice trophy. A model, in solid gold, of a racing balloon, suitably inscribed. I have it still, at home in Port Forlorn."

"Not that prize. It's the body beautiful I mean. The inhibition-and-clothing-shedding Miss Marsden."

"Yes," said Grimes. "She shed her inhibitions all right. But I muffed it. I should have struck while the iron was hot, before she had time to decide that it was really Beadle—of all people!—whom she fancied. He reaped what I'd sown—all the way back to Lindisfarne Base!

"When you get to my age you'll realise that there's no justice in the Universe."

"Isn't there?" she asked, rather too sweetly.

THIRD SOLUTION TO LUCIFER IN LAS VEGAS (From page 84)

Suzie instructed her friend to play the colors with single chips, each worth one ozmuf. Every time he placed a bet on red or black, Suzie put 100 ozmufs on the other color!

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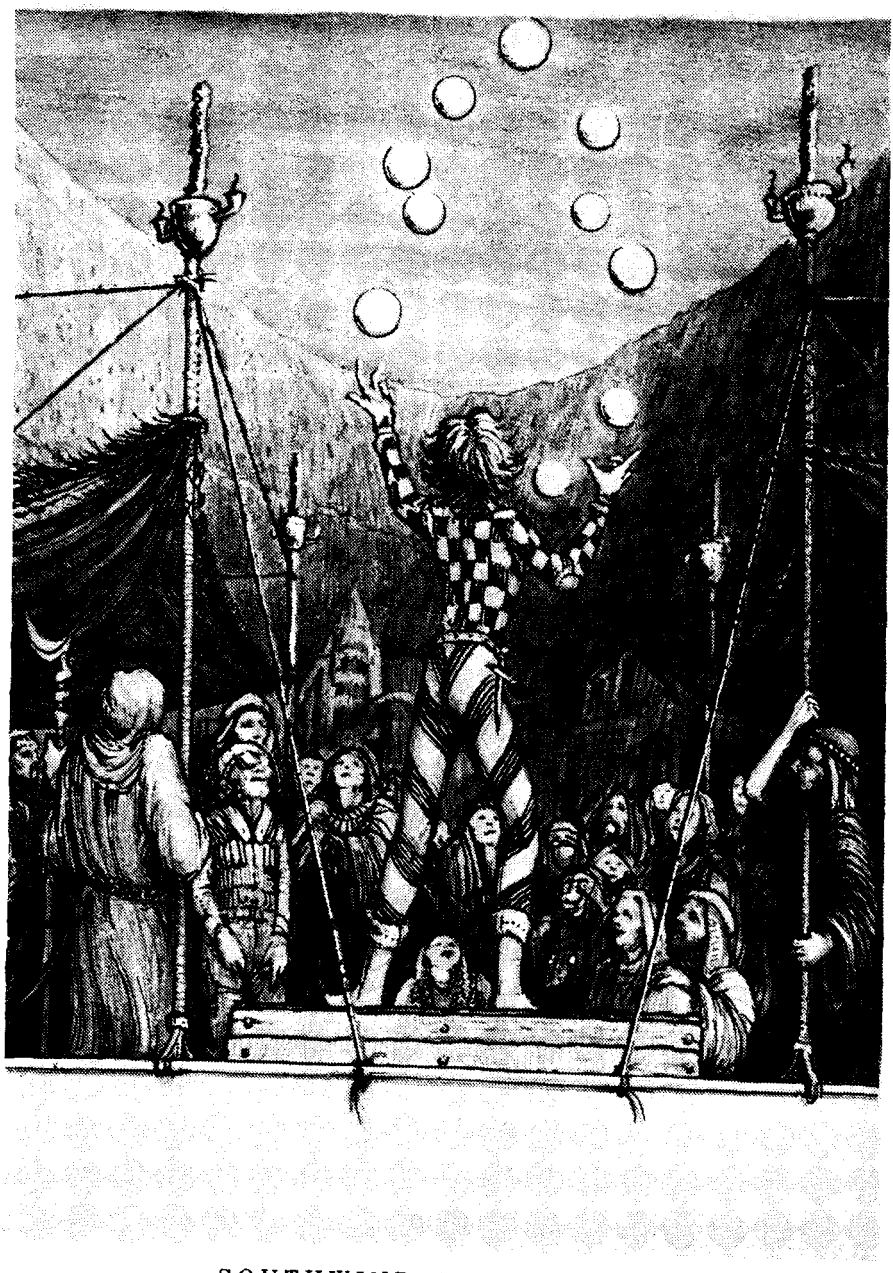

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Gleia's adventures have been reported in the February and the June 1979 issues of this magazine. Here're the latest events in her saga.

Gleia grew restless again. When the ice melted in Cern Radnavar's harbor, the soft wind that blew in from the south whispered to her of things she'd never seen. While the double sun Horli-Hesh pushed up over the cern behind her, she climbed a rock nestling in the noisy water near the harbor's entrance, displacing as she did this a few dozen birds and more small scurrying things she didn't bother trying to identify. Legs crossed, hood pulled well forward to shield her head from the blue sun's bite, she perched on the rock and stared out toward the open water.

"Southwind," she murmured. "I was a beggar, then a thief, then a slave in all but name in Carhenas. And I left Carhenas at my own pleasure. I was daughter to Temokeuu-my-father, adopted into the seaborn, comfortable and warmed by affection. And I left him. Southwind, I live in comfort and affection here with my seaborn sister and friend Jevati. And now . . . " She laughed and flung out her arms, embracing the wind that pushed against her.

"Talking to yourself?" Jevati's contralto broke through the noise of the wind and water.

Gleia grinned down at her friend. "Talking to the wind, little fish." Jevati was plumper these days with a silver sheen to the delicate blue-green of her skin. Once again she was a cherished daughter instead of a sick and neglected wife. Once again she danced in waters with her own, filled with joy and lightness. Gleia dropped onto her knees and watched Jevati struggle up the side of the rock. The seaborn were not made for climbing.

Breathing in quick short pants, Jevati fell into a tired sprawl beside Gleia. She sat silent, staring out into the wind until a line of vandars flew overhead, strong wings cutting into the wind, eerie cries counterpointing the continual brush-brush of the water. She straightened and rested a webbed hand on Gleia's shoulder. "You're not content here any more, my mammal. You want to leave us."

Gleia curved her neck and rested her cheek briefly on the hand. Then she straightened, looked down at hands opening and closing.

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"I don't know, little fish." She was silent again for a while. The wind coiled around them, warmer than the rock, smelling of summer and green growing things. Off to the south a small boat was running before the wind, heading for the harbor. She watched the white triangle of sail grow larger as the crew brought the boat skillfully past the Grinders and into the channel. "Where would I go?"

"I thought you might want to go home. Temokeuu . . ."

"Home!" Gleia threw herself recklessly back on the rock, arm flung across her face to protect it from the sting of hard blue Hesh. "Home." The word was muffled by her sleeve. Even more softly, she said, "I've never had a home, just a temporary resting place, even with Temokeuu."

"I don't understand you." Jevati stroked her hand along the arm that passed over her friend's face. "You've got a home with me. Always."

"I know." Gleia felt a sudden weariness. Jevati said she didn't understand, but didn't mean it. *The friendship between us is real and deep,* Gleia thought. *But this is a part of me she can't possibly understand. Where was I born? When? Of what people?* She moved her arm a little so she could see her friend's face. A sudden revulsion for her wallow in self-pity brought her sitting up with a sharp laugh. "Southwind's making me itch, that's all." Then she looked past Jevati. She sucked in her breath, jumped to her feet, waved wildly.

The figure standing at the tiller waved back, beckoned to another, jumped overboard. Moments later Tetaki was clambering awkwardly up the rock. He collapsed grinning beside the two women. "This habit of yours for sitting atop rocks, Gleia-my-sister . . . ." He chuckled and shook his head, scattering drops of water over her arm and leg.

"Tetaki, what're you doing here?"

"Visiting my sister."

"Idiot!"

"Well then, we're here to set up some things for the thissik."

"How well did they winter?"

"Might have been better. Most of them lived. They're starting to wake the sleepers. Got most of the houses cleared out, but they need help with growing food and harvesting the sea." He grinned again, nacreous pointed teeth gleaming bloodily in Horli's red light. "Month or two from now, the Keeper and I . . . remember the Keeper?"

Gleia snorted. "No winter ice in my head, brother. I remember the Keeper. What about him?"

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"He's bought into a trade circuit with Temokeuu-my-father. We're going to hit the ports and cerns south of here far as the Drylands." He reached out and took her hand. "Temokeuu'd like you to come home with me."

Jevati stirred, gave a small sharp cry quickly cut off: a protest. She reached out, stopped her hand, dropped it onto her thigh. Gleia saw her troubled face and felt a pang of regret. Then she moved her shoulders impatiently and turned back to Tetaki. "I'm not ready yet, brother." She looked past him toward the Grinders. "You came from the south."

"Got a message for you."

Gleia stiffened, a fluttering in her stomach.

"Juggler was mad as hell when you disappeared."

"So?" She looked down and found her hands clenched into fists. She straightened out her fingers and rested them on her thighs. "That was a long time ago. There's a winter between us now."

"Well, I calmed him down by explaining about Jevati's widow journey."

"Then he knew where I was. He could have been here if he wanted to." Again she looked down, feeling a growing chill that made her tremble in spite of the day's warmth and the soft pressure of the wind.

"The Thissik needed him. So he stayed."

She closed her eyes, remembered the worn cynical face of the Juggler. "That doesn't sound like him."

Tetaki chuckled. "You knew him—how long? Three days?"

Gleia shrugged. "You said you had a message."

"Right." He flipped a hand at the boat rocking beside a pier, sails taken down, the seaborn crew sitting on the pier, legs dangling, waiting for him. "We're just back from Thrakesh. Left the Juggler there. He said for you to come if you want, but get there by the 37th of this month or don't bother." He bent down and touched her cheek. "That's it, sister." He straightened, sighed. "Got work to do. See you when." He eased himself over the edge and began climbing down the rock.

Jevati dropped her head onto her crossed arms a moment, then looked over at Gleia. "What are you going to do?" Her voice was soft and sad, her mouth drawn down into a gentle droop.

"You know it already, little fish." She got slowly to her feet and stood looking to the south. "Shove everything into the *Dragonfish* and go. Help me?"

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Jevati rose and moved across the rock to stand beside Gleia. After a minute she slid her arm about Gleia's waist and leaned against her thin nervous body. "I don't want to. I will, of course."

Gleia hugged her affectionately. "Little fish."

"Will you be back?"

"Don't know. I won't forget you, Jevati. That's all I can be sure of." She felt the seaborn trembling. "I'm sorry. I can't help it."

Gleia left Jevati staring wistfully after her as she sent the *Dragonfish* quartering the wind, her heart as light as the wisps of cloud skimming over the spring blue of the sky.

For a week she sailed south and west, keeping the great black cliffs on her right, each day much like the one before. Occasionally one of the seaborn would surface, wave a greeting and sink under again. Sometimes one would swim alongside the boat to talk with her a while. She was amused to find herself something of a hero among the seaborn because of her part in turning the stranded thissik from slave masters to a vigorous new market for seaborn trade. There was a rising excitement among the seaborn about Tetaki's coming trade circuit.

On the eighth day the wind was suddenly gone. The sail slapped idly against the mast and the boat rocked up and down, creeping south along the Sestatiri ocean current. Gleia grimaced at the empty sky. Horli was high and Hesh had moved behind her so that the day was hot and still and red, but free of Hesh's dangerous bite. The sluggish current took the boat along, bobbing like a long slim cork on the purple-tinged water. As the day crept on, she stripped off her cafta and went over the side. The water was cool, moving in long slow rolls. She swam along beside the boat until she was tired, then pulled herself back inside and let the sun dry her body, stretched out naked and unprotected in the bottom of the boat. Sun-bathing was rare on Jaydugar. Hesh would take the skin off any fool who tried it. The rocking of the boat lulled her into a heavy sleep.

The cracking of the sail against the mast jerked her awake. She sat up, clutching at her head as a dull pain throbbed behind her eyes. The wind was back, coming from the north this time. Gleia uncleated the mainsheet and let the boom swing out so the sail filled with wind. The little boat began skimming southwest again. She breathed a sigh of relief, glad to be free of the calm.

Horli was low in the west, half of her red circle gone behind the stone. Gleia felt the wind pushing at her, cold fingers pushing

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through her sweat-stiffened hair. In spite of the growing chill in the wind, she felt sticky and uncomfortable and nervous for no reason she could discern.

The sun vanished completely, leaving streaks of crimson and violet along the horizon. By the time these had faded, Aab was already high in the sky and glowing like a crescent of milky opal. Gleia looked about. She wasn't sleepy, and the night was bright enough. She decided to sail as long as she could into the night to make up for the day's lack of progress.

Later, when Aab and Zeb were both close to setting, the wind turned erratic, eventually circling around until it swung north to south and back to north. Curls of fog began peeling off the water. Gleia sighed with regret and brought the nose of the boat into the wind. After lowering the sail, she dug out a blanket and settled herself to sleep. She drifted into a series of nightmares, dipping in and out of sleep as the fog thickened and closed in around the *Dragonfish*.

A dull thud and a jarring impact that sent the Dragonfish rolling violently woke her. She jerked up and looked about hazily, her mind dulled by sleep. She heard shouts, looked up, saw dim figures bending over the railing of a ship looming out of the fog like some ancient monster of the sea. Splashes and a thud; men overside, one in the boat, others in the sea beside her boat. Hands closed over the side. They were in. Catch-vine slapped around her arms and torso. The misty figures stood over her a minute then were shouting for a line from the ship.

That night she woke in darkness with her wrists hurting. Groans and stenches filled the hold-section around her as the other captives cried out in their sleep, broke wind, or let overburdened bladders find relief. She pressed her wrists together, trying to quiet the pain. She had struggled to force her hands through the cuffs until her flesh was scraped raw and her muscles strained. Briefly she regretted the strength of her hands, then she leaned back against cushions that smelled of old sweat and other less pleasant things.

Cushions. Thinking about them amused her briefly. She folded her hands in her lap, smiling into the darkness. When the captain had looked over the plunder from her boat, the caftas and uncompleted work the men had dumped in front of him, his eyes had sparked with greed. He knew the worth of what he saw. His scorn altered instantly. He looked from the embroidery to her. "Your work?"

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When she nodded, he grunted with satisfaction and beckoned to one of his men. Gleia was led off and taken down into a forward hold. Inside the black and stinking enclosure, the seamen's lantern threw a flickering light over a mixed clutter of chained bodies: Two catmen, drugged into dullness to keep them from fighting against the chains until they killed themselves. A leather-skinned Drylander blinking watery eyes at the light that was painful for him.Six or seven women of various races.

As Gleia waited unhappily, toes curling up off the slimy floor, a luscious young girl with a pretty, sullen face was kicked unceremoniously off the cushions and chained farther down on bare boards. Gleia was shoved forward and chained in her place. In the uncertain light she was dismayed to see the girl's rage and jealousy.

Now she looked into the thick blackness toward the place where the girl lay. *So dependent on the valuation of others!* She shook her head. *Better to be gifted than pretty*, she thought. Chains rattled as she lifted her hand to rub again at the brands on her cheek. *A plain brown thing with a face badly marred. The Captain's first opinion. Not worth selling, barely worth raping. The skill made the difference. Shining gold on the hoof.* She jerked about on the cushions, itchy with annoyance and frustration. Plans shipwrecked. *Something has to be done*, she thought. *A woman who simply wants to be left alone to do things her own way should be able to.* She moved her hands again, listening to the clink of the metal. *Slave! I'm tired of having to work myself loose over and over again.* With a sigh she lay back on her meager cushions and closed her eyes.

She woke again to the sound of shouts, violent and continuous, muffled somewhat by the walls of the ship but still audible. She listened a moment, then grinned into the fetid darkness. The Captain was arguing with a Thrakeshi official about wharfage rates. This went on for a while longer, then the voices dropped to a conversational level as they reached agreement. When the sounds outside diminished, she began to hear chains clinking as the other captives woke and sat up.

Some time later she heard several loud thumps then blinked as a square of light flooded into the hold, nearly blinding her dark-adapted eyes. When she climbed out on the deck, the first in a chain of five, she stood blinking at black cliffs looming over the ship.

The markets of Thrakesh were famous for several reasons. The stalls were barges moored in the ever-warm waters of the harbor. On market days the blue circle was a magic world of color and noise.

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The wharves and warehouses, inns and taverns, the decaying hovels and more substantial homes, all these were built on a narrow crescent of land circling the horseshoe bay and backing up against the mighty cliffs. The city itself perched on that sheer stone cliff a hundred meters over the commercial area.

Following the irregular curve of the cliff, a thick stone wall shut off from view all but the bright gilded roofs of the great houses of the lords of Thrakesh and of the merchant masters. The human seawrack that came to land here where the hot springs on the harbor bottom made life possible during the long winter; the ragged boatmen, the longshoremen, the hired officials, the visitors, the traders: these outsiders could look with envy and hate at the roofs; but none of them dared climb the twisting paths that led up to the gates in the wall, gates that stayed mockingly open all day.

The black cliffs that looked so formidable were riddled by blowholes and bubbles. Some of these were used to store food against seige, others emerged to the air high up on the cliffs and housed barrels of oil that could be heated and dumped on attackers.

Behind the houses a second black cliff rose. Its top was smoothed off and a second wall added, built of rock quarried by slaves and hoisted up there by slave muscle and slave sweat.

The traders of Thrakesh were notorious for their scrupulous honesty and for the outrageous prices they charged for that honesty. The market was the safest place on the coast—if the trader had enough money and cared to pay its prices.

Waiting to be told what to do next, Gleia continued to look about, rather astonished by the colorful scene. *I've heard a thousand stories about this place,* she thought. *And from what I see, I think most of them are true.*

The seamen prodded the slave chains into longboats and started ferrying them out toward the market, cutting solemnly through darting water-taxis moving about on the calm blue of the bay like brilliant water beetles. They were filled with city folk from above, with visitors staying in the inns, with others from the many ships at the wharves or anchored out by the breakwater.

Other than the cerns, which were closed to all but the seaborn, Thrakesh was the best anchorage for hundreds of stadia along the coast. Many of those converging on the market barges were ship captains and master traders looking as much to exchange complete cargos as to buy outright. Most of the breakwater-side barges were rented to those outsiders.

As the long boats moved through them, Gleia looked around with

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intense interest. The somber grey structures of the rented barges were silent, all the drama confined inside the walls, the only signs of life the dozing boatmen hunched under their bright canvas awnings, and the more alert seamen keeping an eye on their masters' boats. Under the Captain's grunted orders the sea men sent the long boats working into the stream of traffic moving toward the inner lines of market barges. Then the longboat she was in emerged into a stretch of open water.

Some distance to her right she saw a crowd gathered on a flat, open barge with a platform in the middle and an orange-and-blue canvas roof stretched out like a huge tent. in the center of the crowd, on the stage a meter above their heads, a gaudy figure postured and turned, a man with long red hair flying in the erratic breeze. Shimmering blueness swung up and down, sometimes replaced by glimmers of gold that vanished and returned to blue as they touched his white-painted hands, swinging up and around the blankness of his white-painted face. Shounach. He was too far for her to make out his features, but it had to be Shounach.

She moved her hands and the chains clinked. She frowned down at them. He was so close. She slid her eyes cautiously around. No one was paying any attention to her. Without the chain she could be over the side and away. *Without the chain.* So close and so far away. She looked wistfully at the tiny colorful figure as the boat slid between two tall barges, blanking out the scene.

Gleia sat in a wooden straight-backed chair, shut into a small bare room with a single barred window set high in the wall. The chain was off her neck. She was free of any restraint at all. Simply she could not leave the room. She'd expected—well, she didn't know, something more like Carhenas when several ships were new in port and celebrating their temporary victory over the treacherous sea. But the slave market she saw was extraordinarily decorous. She wasn't exposed naked on a block. There was no auction with cold-eyed buyers prodding and poking her.

The captain had greeted the barge master as an old acquaintance. The small sober man had inspected the chains of captives, nodding, shaking his head, clicking his tongue, muttering offers as he moved. Occasionally the Captain had argued. Occasionally the murmured price was raised. When the barge master reached the end of the chains, the slaves were led away to be cleaned and re-clothed.

When she was clean, with her hair washed and towelled as dry as possible then combed neatly back from her face, a tiny Mariti

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slave handed her a fresh cafta with narrow vertical stripes of black and white. The material was coarse, unpleasant to the skin; but it was clean, and Gleia accepted it with a gratitude that annoyed her when she became aware of her surrender.

In the little room she sat mute as the barge master brought in a series of men to look at her and at her work. They all dismissed her with a glance but her work held them. She surprised herself with the intense pride she felt when she saw their appreciation.

Then the barge master led in a man he treated with extravagant deference. *Despois Lorenzai,* the little man called him. He was a big bulky man but looked solid—with the strength of a mountain tars and something of its feral quality. The belly that pushed out the front of his robes was more muscle than fat. He kept a sober demeanor, spoke in low measured tones; but when he stood over Gleia, his eyes brooding down at her, when he arched his heavy body over her to peer at the brands on her cheek, she sensed a wildness in him that was sternly repressed but not eradicated. With this meager evidence she decided that he was a man who might succeed greatly or might destroy himself utterly by taking impossible chances. Amused at her mindleaps, she watched him turning her caftas over in his hands, examining the stitches and designs with a glow in his eyes that the barge master read as quickly as she.

The small man murmured a price. Gleia wrinkled her nose, disgusted. She'd wanted to hear the price set on her. Though she had no intention of remaining a slave, fetching a respectable sum would soothe her pride and give her something to laugh about with Shounach later on.

Lorenzai raised a heavy eyebrow and turned to leave. Hastily the bargemaster plucked at his sleeve and began talking again in low swift mutters. The merchant looked over his head and met her eyes. The laughter in them challenged him, and he began bargaining in earnest.

She waited in the small room until Lorenzai's housemaster came for her. He was a small brown man whose head topped out at Gleia's chin. He had a round, wrinkled face like an ancient, evil baby. With a smirk on his face he bent over her and snapped a slave ring about her neck. When she stood, he looked evilly at her and stalked out, leaving her to follow as best she could.

Gleia carefully suppressed a smile as she moved through the narrow corridors to the landing where the water-taxi waited. She was forever barred from his favor by the length of her head.

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The water-taxi was square-ended and narrow, roofed with bright-colored canvas stretched flat over a rectangular frame. There was a seat for one person at the bow, a second seat in the center of the boat, and a third for the boatman at the stern. It glided smoothly from the landing and slid toward the end of the line of wharves. Gleia pushed back her hood and let the breeze wandering over the water flow through her hot sweaty hair. The little room had been airless and dull. She sighed with pleasure, not caring if Ussuf heard.

Hesh and Horli were approaching zenith, Hesh visible as a tiny bead of blue on the side of Horli. It was coming up high heat so the bustle of the morning was dying to a drowsy amble. Gleia glanced toward the tent barge as it came into view, but the crowd was breaking up and the stage empty. She was disappointed, then surprised at the extent of her disappointment. *He's finished for the day, that's all,* she thought. *He'll be back. I hope. . . . It's not the 37th yet.*

When the one-eyed boatman reached his customary mooring, he swung the boat against the ladder and waited. Ussuf swarmed up onto the pier, tossed him a silver coin, then stalked away. Gleia snorted with amusement, pulled up her hood, and hauled herself onto the dock. Then she sped along the worn planks toward Ussuf, who was waiting impatiently at the start of a switch-backed scratch that wound steeply up the black stone.

The trail was too steep to climb comfortably. Ussuf kept altering his pace, slowing abruptly until she nearly bumped into him, then speeding up until her legs ached from trying to keep up with him. Her temper began fraying, the anger boiling in her to match the heat radiated by the black stone. She kept stumbling on the carefully roughened track; at times was forced to stop and wipe the sweat from her face so she could see where her feet were taking her.

By the time she reached the top, she was shaking with fatigue and fury. Panting and trembling she looked into the housemaster's small bright eyes and smiled, so angry that acting was no effort at all. His sly glee dissolved. Disappointed, he wheeled and stumped through the gate in the wall, the ends of his headcloth fluttering out in small wings beside his ears. Gleia clamped her mouth shut and followed.

There was a guard lounging against the planks of the gate. Startled, Gleia stared at him. His leathers were decorated until no inch remained untouched. His eyebrows were gilded and his moustache twisted into fierce points that extended beyond the wings of a headcloth stiff with gold thread. The cloth was held on his head by gilded cords whose tasselled ends hung down beside his ear, brushing

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against his shoulder each time he moved.

Ussuf was waiting impatiently at the end of the alley that led from the gate into a wider street. She hurried toward him, but couldn't resist a final look back at the guard. He preened as he met her eyes, obviously convinced that he'd stunned her with his magnificence. Gleia followed Ussuf along the broad inner street, looking with interest at the elaborate facades of the great houses. They were built of the same black stone as the cliffs and carved as elaborately as the guard's leathers. There were few people in the street, all of them in the black and white stripes of slaves. Gleia shook her head, puzzled, wondering if Thrakesh's boasted strength had gone hollow in the middle. That ridiculous guard . . .

Humming softly, Gleia bent over the fragile material, her fingers sliding the needle in and out with quick precision. The oil lamp threw a steady glow over the sleeve bands with their scrollwork of leaves and vines in olive and ocher. One lay beside her on the table, its design completed. The other was close to being finished. She yawned. *Need a break,* she thought. She set the work aside and stood up. Rubbing at the brand scars on her face, she strolled across the small room and leaned into the window embrasure.

Small Zeb was a skinny crescent swimming through a light mist, while Aab was an opaline nail-clipping on the horizon. Gleia sighed and moved her shoulders until she rested comfortably on crossed arms, looking out across the harbor of Thrakesh.

Aab edged higher, lighting up the tips of the waves with her thinning crescent of silver. *Slave.* Gleia grimaced at the shimmering water. *Tomorrow,* she thought. *Somehow I'll get out and find him.* She ran her eyes over the dark bulk of the market and the pin points of light that marked the positions of the ships anchored out by the breakwater. *Wonder where he is now.* She sighed again and pulled away from the window.

As she settled at the sewing table and took up her work, she thought about the heavily-carved outer walls of the merchant's house. *I could climb down on those carvings,* she thought. *Have to get over the wall, though. That'll take a bit of doing.* She chuckled as she considered Lorenzai and his probable attitude toward her intentions. Not a man to be taken lightly, her new owner. She set the last stitches then held the band up close to the lamp, checking to make sure the work needed no final touches. He would tolerate sloppy work as little as he would being cheated. She nodded. It was good. Simple but effective. Wrapping the sleeve bands in muslin,

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she set them aside, then stretched and yawned. *A long day.* Lifting the chimney, she blew out the lamp and wound the wick down. In the new darkness Aab's light painted a square of silver on the door close to the floor. She made a face at it, glanced at the bed and groaned. Then she went to the door and opened it a crack. No sound. No sign of anyone in the hall outside. She slipped out.

A single oil lamp burned where the corridor met another running at right angles to it. Some light trickled into the gloom beyond the small circle of brilliance. Gleia frowned, closed her eyes and sought the memory of how she was brought here, then she straightened and reached out for the wall. Her fingers trailing along the stone, she moved slowly off down the corridor.

Slowly, carefully, she worked her way into the maze of corridors and through the slave dormitories under the roof, then went down the narrow flight of stairs toward the floor below. And found the way blocked by a grating with a large, clumsy lock. She stood there a moment fingering the lock, her mind going back to her childhood and the lessons her gang leader had forced on her. *Too long ago? Have I forgotten the touch? I've got no tools.* Sighing she turned and started back up the stairs.

A pounding on her door jerked her from a heavy sleep. She sat up, groaning and bleary-eyed. In the fuzzy red twilight she pushed reluctantly onto her feet and stumbled to the battered table propped against the wall at the foot of the bed. With both hands she lifted the heavy ewer and poured a dollop of water into the bowl. The night had given the water a pleasant chill that stung away the last wisps of sleep.

When she was finished she poured water from the bowl into the slop bucket, then sat on the end of the bed and began combing her hair. *There's nothing up here,* she thought. *I have to get down below.* The comb scraped on the slave ring. She worked a finger under the ring and ran it around inside the curve. *Have to get rid of this thing somehow.* Her mind flew back to the spring before when the thissik had locked her into a similar ring. *At least this won't explode,* she thought. *I wonder what you're doing here, Juggler. Wish I was out of this and with you.* She dragged the comb impatiently through the last of the tangles, tied her hair back from her face with a scrap of material, then slid into her slave cafta. She wriggled the cafta into place and went out to breakfast.

As she'd half-expected, the other female slaves were still taking their attitude from Ussuf, giving her surreptitious pinches and glowering looks. *A little man who resents anyone taller than him,* she

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thought. *Especially a slave with privileges.* She looked briefly around at the sullen faces, then kept her eyes on her dish, eating the porridge with a quiet concentration its taste scarcely deserved. Again her solitude was driven home to her. There was no one here she could trust, no one to laugh with, to tease and quarrel with. She bit into a section of the quella fruit beside her bowl. *I've grown soft, never used to need any company but my own. Never even wanted it. Tetaki, Temokeuu-my-father, Jevati, Shounach: you've spoiled me, my friends.* She washed her fruit down with a last swallow of cha, trying to wash away the thorns of loneliness with it.

She spent the hours after breakfast in the sewing room allotted to her, sketching designs and waiting to be summoned. When the morning was half gone, a slight blond girl came drifting into the room and beckoned to her. Gleia saw the ring around her neck and was abruptly angry. The child winced as she saw the flare of anger, and Gleia hastily controlled herself. "What is it, little one?"

The girl touched her lips, shook her head, then beckoned again.

At the entrance to the wizard maze an aged Mariti male, tongueless and blind, wrapped soft white cloths about their faces and led them into the maze.

The wizard maze filled the large room beyond the bare anteroom with sliding panels and dead ends. Whenever Lorenzai ordered it, the route was changed by sliding the panels aside to open new ways and close the old. The maze was the only entrance to the master's private quarters.

Her determination fueled by a growing annoyance, Gleia put to work a skill she'd learned almost before she could walk.Her sense of direction and her direction-memory never missed. She kept track of turns and twists, silently counting her steps as the mute led her along. When they came out into the bare room on the far side and the mute took away the blindfolds, she knew she could retrace that route whenever she wanted.

Amrezeh, Lorenzai's wife, was sitting up in her wide bed, dressed in a lacy green bedgown. Her small pointed face was alive with interest. "You're the new one."

Gleia bowed her head. "Yes, mistress."

"Lorenzai says you do beautiful work. He says he set a task for you yesterday to see how I would like it. Did you finish?"

"Yes, mistress." Gleia bowed her head again and extended the sleeve bands.

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"Bring them closer." As Gleia stepped forward, Amrezeh noticed the scars on her cheek. She gasped and pressed a small hand against her mouth. Then she pulled it down, eyes bright with curiosity. "What happened to your face? Bend down." She touched velvet fingertips to the letters burned into Gleia's flesh. "Brands. What do they mean?"

Gleia was silent a minute. The brands were like talismans to her and she was reluctant to speak of them. She found it harder and harder to act out the slave's part. She was silent too long. Amrezeh's brows began to lower; she didn't like having to wait on a slave. Gleia forced her reluctant hand up and touched the oldest brand. "This marks me as a taken thief, bonded to serve where they told me, mistress. The Kadiff put me under bond to a cafta maker who beat my skills into me." She touched the second scar. "And made it possible for me to buy my bond. This marks the cancellation."

"And now you're a slave again." Amrezeh sighed, but her eyes were shining. "What stories you must have." She drooped. "I was shut up in my father's house and only left it to come to this." Gleia caught a flash of blue as Amrezeh peeped slyly at her, assessing the effect of her words. "Not that Lorenzai has been unkind. It's just I get so bored! Enough of that." She pulled her knees up and rested her arms on them. "Let me see the bands. Sit down there where I can talk to you without shouting." She pointed to a low footstool beside the bed.

As Gleia settled herself, Amrezeh began examining the bands critically, drawing her fingers over the stitches to see if they were small and firmly set, examining the design itself. "You completed this in one day?"

"It's a simple design, mistress. And I worked late. Master said I was to finish the bands before sleeping."

"Um." She pulled the lengths through her soft pale fingers. "Simple but charming. In one day . . . " Her voice trailing off, she fixed her vivid blue eyes on Gleia. "What did you call yourself, girl?"

"Gleia, mistress." She lowered her eyes and moved her shoulders cautiously. Playing slave submissive was making her back ache and starting a pain behind her eyes. She found Amrezeh's friendliness extremely seductive. It crept through her defenses and teased her to respond with equal warmth. But she'd learned her skepticism on the streets of Carhenas where trust was a quick way to pain or death. The parchment designs rustled as her hands tightened.

Amrezeh pounced on that." What do you have there?"

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"If mistress pleases . . . " Gleia put the roll in the outstretched hand. "While waiting to be summoned, I prepared several other designs."

The tough translucent parchment rustled crisply as Amrezeh unrolled the drawings. The first sheet bore a design of waves and fish, highly stylized, the curves squared off. Color values were indicated by ink washes—the palest grey to solid black. The values passed through the angular forms with a rippling grace. "Ah. Unusual and delightful." Amrezeh flashed a smile at Gleia. "You really are gifted." Then she set that sheet aside and examined the second.

That design was an abstract pattern of interlocking, irregular shapes, not too impressive in the black and grey of the ink washes. Amrezeh tapped her fingers thoughtfully on the parchment, then closed her eyes, a faint smile on her lovely face. She turned abruptly to Gleia. "You flatter me."

Gleia dropped her head. The surprise she felt wasn't exactly the flattery that Amrezeh thought. She hadn't expected that design to mean anything to an untrained eye, had done it to please herself. "No, mistress," she said softly. Pain beat in long slow pulses behind her eyes. She was annoyed at herself for bringing the designs, only prolonging this miserable interview.

The small blond woman smiled and put the second sketch aside. One glance at the third was all she needed. It was a simple design of spring flowers with nothing really interesting about it. Amrezeh pulled the first two back in front of her and went over them again. Then she tugged on the bell rope.

The frail child came gliding in and sank onto her knees, bending over until her forehead touched the carpet. "Go to the storeroom," Amrezeh said crisply. "Bring the blue-green avrishum and the white katani. Understand?"

The feathery blonde curls flipped about as the child nodded, then she stood with careful grace and slipped out of the room.

Amrezeh picked up the sea design. "This first, I think. I can't wait to see it realized. How long do you think it would take to complete a cafta? Do you cut?"

"Mistress, I can't say for sure until I've worked on it a little. And if you have one who cuts for you, perhaps it would be better for that one to continue. I was not taught cutting."

The small slave was almost lost behind the big bolts of cloth as she stumbled into the doorway. She hesitated there, waiting for permission to enter. Amrezeh smiled and said pleasantly, "Bring

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them here, child, and put them on the bed beside me. Then wait outside until I call you."

The avrishum was a greyed blue-green with a subtle darkening where folds touched the light; it was beautifully suited as a background for the sea design. Gleia was startled by this casual glimpse into how rich Lorenzai was. A body length of that material would sell for more than her purchase price. Beside it the white katani, also a rare material, looked almost common. It was a crisp fabric, so fine it was translucent.

"The avrishum, I think. The katani might serve for the abstract." Amrezeh turned to Gleia, eyebrows up, waiting for her comment.

Gleia could see the harsh bright colors and shapes contrasting with the delicacy of the katani. The garment would have a rich flamboyance. She glanced at Amrezeh. *Might be too strong for her,* she thought. *I don't know her. Is this only an act she's putting on for me? If so, why does she bother? Something in her that makes it necessary to conquer everyone around her before she discards them? What could have twisted her so in the sheltered life she's led? Or was it so sheltered?* There was something exaggerated about her behavior that shouted to Gleia of a weakness too strongly compensated for. Habbiba had looked like that when she was trying to impress a high-born customer. *How young I was then, but I could smell it when Habbiba was pretending. And I can smell it now.*

Amrezeh ran her thumb across a corner of the avrishum. "You'll need thread." She slipped out of the bed and padded a few steps to a cluttered dressing table. Opening an elaborate jewel case at one end, she dug about inside then brought out a handful of gold coins. "Come here, girl."

Gleia came round the end of the bed and took the coins.

Amrezeh tilted her head back to look up into Gleia's face. "I want you to go down to the market and get that thread; wouldn't trust any other eye than yours for that. Mind you, don't stint on quality; but don't be uselessly extravagant. What you have should be enough. . . ." She paused, frowned. "No. Wait." She wheeled and went out through a door Gleia hadn't noticed before. Minutes later she was back with several silver drachs. "You'll need these for the boatman. One drach to take you out and back. Don't let him take you for more. Be back in time for the midday meal." Her smile widened suddenly; her blue eyes twinkled. "Don't yield to temptation, my dear. Sad though it is, you've got no chance of escaping."

Gleia passed the guard who smirked at her until she wanted to

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kick him. Halfway down the track she stopped and leaned on the safety wall and looked out over the bay. She could just see the pointed top of the tent roof over the stage. With a sigh, she wiped the sweat off her face and continued on down the winding track.

The boats at this last pier were a bedraggled lot. There were patches of decay in the canvas tops and paint peeling from the wood. The worst-looking one had a skim of water over the floorboards. The boatmen matched their craft, ugly and infirm. Gleia went down the pier, stopping at the one-eyed man's boat. She brought out a silver drach.

The one-eyed man shook his head. "Two."

Gleia raised an eyebrow. "One."

"Two." The boatman sneered toward the other boats. "If you want to swim. . . ."

"One. Swimming doesn't come into it if I want to walk a little."

The boatman grunted and held out his hand. Gleia tossed the drach to him. In spite of his missing eye, he caught it adroitly. With a neat economy of motion he swung onto the back seat and brought the boat around so that it was parallel to the dock.

Gleia went agilely down the ladder and settled on the middle seat. "The shop of Shahd the thread seller," she said crisply.

When the taxi passed the open space, the crowd was back and Shounach was performing. Gleia lifted a hand. "Wait. Take me over there." She pointed.

The boatman complied silently. He brought her to the landing and waited until she stepped out. Gleia dug into her sleeve and tossed him a second drach. "Wait here till I come back. Then I want the thread shop."

He shrugged and settled down to sleep until she chose to return.

She stood looking down at him a moment, fingers stroking the house badge sewn on her right shoulder. That was what made them all polite to her. In an odd way she had the power of Lorenzai behind her. She rubbed at her nose as she turned to inspect the crowd around the stage.

It was loosely packed on the outside. Gleia managed to work her way through spectators, mostly men, as they laughed and yelled their appreciation. As she got nearer the platform the crowd was denser and quieter. It was harder to push through them. She wriggled and shoved, mostly ignored, as they stared in fascination at the stage. At last she broke through and came up against the edge of the platform. She closed her hands around the outer plank, pushed back with elbows, bumped her body about until she'd moved the

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staring men aside enough to have breathing space. Then she looked up and met Shounach's eyes.

Swallowing a growing excitement she pulled back her hood so he could see her face better, then she clicked her fingernails against the slave ring.

He nodded, his painted mouth stretching into a quick grin. And he never missed one of the blue spheres circling his head.

She watched him for a while. He began spinning slowly on his toes, turning around and around without missing one of the growing and shrinking number of glowing spheres. When he faced her again, the blue spheres expanded suddenly to head-sized blurs that flickered in and out of existance, changed suddenly to smallish gilded dragons that snorted and cavorted and shot out miniature tongues of flame as they rose and fell around his mask-like face. Then one by one they changed to crimson jewels catching the light of the sun in dozens of facets and shining red rays out into the crowd and up at the canvas overhead, dancing red light flickering and darting over dazed faces. The balls kept circling and changing. The Juggler was on his toes, then sitting cross-legged, then circling slowly, then whirling. And the spheres kept circling. . . .

Gleia blinked and wrenched her eyes from the figure. Time was passing, time she couldn't afford. She looked up. Hesh was peeping from behind Horli and both were two-thirds of the way up the eastern arc of their day. Sighing, she began pushing her way back through the crowd.

The boatman swung the taxi against the ladder. Gleia climbed up clutching her packet of thread. She walked slowly down the pier and hesitated at the base of the cliff. After one look at the winding track, she rebelled. The morning's play acting had worn her out. She couldn't do it any more, not for a while anyway. She stepped back on the pier and looked along the crescent toward the middle. A lot of activity there, water-taxis darting about, groups of men gesticulating, snatches of music coming out the taverns. She began walking along the wharves, heading toward the taverns in the center of the crescent, looking down the short side alleys as she moved past them. Behind the great warehouses, hovels cobbled together from driftwood and whatever other scraps of refuse were useable clustered like starlings' nests against the stone. She saw occasional drunks sprawled in and around these places. Otherwise there were few people this far from center.

The wharves were mostly empty, the ships having discharged

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their cargoes and retreated to the breakwater where anchorage was much cheaper. Many of their Captains and master traders were engaged in marathon bargaining in the rented barges out in the market. What ships were left creaked slowly in the rocking water and the erratic breeze with drowsy watchmen curled up in the few patches of shade on deck. There were sneak thieves among the seawrack living in the hovels, driven by desperation that made them disregard the death-by-torture of the captured thief.

This end of the crescent was still and somnolent in the growing midday heat so it was startling when a hoarse voice called, "Hey, girl."

She looked around. For a moment she saw nothing, then a waving hand caught her eye. A large fat man was sprawled in the meager shelter of a warehouse doorway. His face was moon-round and sweating. There was an amiable grin on his whiskery face, a twinkle in blood-shot blue eyes. Wisps of greasy white hair stuck out in a dirty halo around his face. His grin widened as he met her eyes. He lifted a wobbly wineskin. "Want a drink?"

"Why not." She strolled across the planks into the narrowing shade under the eaves of the warehouse. She glanced back over her shoulder at the suns. "You'll fry your brains, bareheaded like that."

He chuckled "Got it figured." He slapped a meaty knee, tenting his tattered robe. "I don't gotta move 'fore I run outta juice." He handed her the skin and watched as she drank. "You new here?"

She slapped the stopper home and gave the skin back. "Thanks. Yes, I'm new. How'd you know?"

"Thought so. Why I yelled. Only one kinda woman down that way. You too new here to figure that. Thought I'd let you make up your mind 'f you wanted that kinda game."

She sat cross-legged beside his feet, looking down along the crescent to the activity in the middle, then shivered. "I owe you, old man. I wouldn't like that." She started and blinked as a gong note boomed out over the water. "What's that?"

The old man grimaced and squirted more wine into his mouth. "Openin' the Big Gate," he grunted. He sniffed. "Look up, you'll see yourself a sight."

Gleia tilted her head back, shading her eyes with her hand.

The massive gilded gate split in the middle and the two leaves turned slowly outward as she watched. The heavy structure above the gate was swinging slowly over and down while a broad wooden platform slid out from inside the gate. The platform was ornate with carved and gilded railings. The gong sounded again and as the re-

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verberations died away she saw dark figures visible as little more than black shapes jutting above the gilded rail of the platform. Two of them picked up a third and tossed him over the side.

His screams wheeled around the harbor as his body plummeted toward the buildings at the center of the crescent. Down and down. Until there was a crunching noise, then a sudden silence.

Gleia pressed her hand against her mouth and closed her eyes. "Why?" She pulled her hand away. "They threw him over deliberately. Why?"

She could hear the wine slosh as he took a long drink. She looked around to see him cuddling the half-empty skin against his chest. He rubbed his face with his free hand, producing a papery rasping sound. "Ayandar's figurin' to come down. He don't walk like ordinary folk. Got that Madardamned lift. Don't trust it either. Says the stone want blood, don't want it to be his, so he give it some."

"That's crazy."

"Well, so's he. But don't say that in front of anybody up there." He waved the wineskin vaguely in the direction of the cliff top. Then he dabbed at the sweat on his face. "He gettin' crazier by the day. Now he meddlin' with the merchants' guild. They take a lot. Not that. One a these days they get together and toss him over the cliff like that one." He waved a broad meaty hand toward the center. "You listen to them down there. . . ." He stopped and drank some more. "They'd kick him over tomorrow if they weren't scared of the Ayandar's Apartas, those guards of his."

She took the skin from him. "You're talking too much, old man."

He grinned at her, vaguely amiable, not quite present any longer. "You gonna tell on me, sweet thing?"

"Of course not."

"Anyway, who pay attention to a old wreck? You don't want another drink, give that back."

She sighed and handed the wine over, then dug into her sleeve, pulling out a handful of change she had left from buying the thread. With a second sigh she flipped two silver drachs onto his billowing stomach. "Enjoyed the talk." She rose to her feet, stretched and yawned. "Time I was getting back."

He fished the coins out of the folds of his robe. "Girl, they'll have your hide, you come back short. Here."

She waved his hand away. "Mistress didn't bother counting. Keep the damn money. Better you than her, old man." With a laugh she went back along the wharves.

As she leaned into the climb, she thought, *This whole place is*

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going to explode soon. Madar! Got to figure a way out. And money. Or something I can turn into money. Tonight. I'll work on that tonight.

Late that night she set the avrishum aside and rubbed her eyes. Then she stood and walked to the window. She leaned into the embrasure and looked out. *Fog is heavier tonight.*

Aab was a ghost of herself, shimmering through a dozen veils. The water was velvet black except for faint blurs from the ship lights. Once again she wondered about Shounach. What was he doing in Thrakesh? *Juggler. Not waiting for me, I'm sure.* Curiosity was like an itch between her shoulderblades, irritating and in a place she couldn't scratch. She sighed and left the window. *Forget about Shounach. Time to get to work.*

She dug out the long weaving needles she'd salvaged from the sewing room. *The door. Yes.*

She crossed the room and tapped fingertips against the wood. *Hard. Small tight grain. Good.* She opened the door a crack and shut it again on the end of the needle. With her body weight holding the door firmly shut, she bent the needle toward her. It was made of a softish iron and bent readily enough. Several times she took it from her improvised vise and examined the bend until she was satisfied that she had a reasonably right-angled turn. She dealt with the other two needles in the same way.

During the afternoon she'd fashioned some muslin into a crude bag. With a grin she slipped its strap over her shoulder and patted it down against her side. *Back to beginnings. Thief before, now thief again.*

With her picklocks tucked into her sleeve pocket she slipped from the room and made her way to the grating. Her old skills came back faster than she'd expected as fingers remembered how to feel with the probes and force back the wards. It took her about five minutes to get the lock open and only two to lock it behind her.

She flitted down the stairs breathing hard. At the bottom of the flight she stopped and pressed her hands hard against her chest, struggling to calm herself.

When she felt steadier, she took a candle from her bag and lit it at one of the wall lamps. The halls down on this floor were much better lit than those in the warren above. She wrapped a rag around the candle to catch most of the drippings and looked around. *Loose on the family floor!* Curiosity was almost as big a drive as her need to finance her escape.

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She wandered through the halls, poking into sitting rooms, several empty austere rooms that were merely spaces for housing bodies temporarily while they waited to talk to Lorenzai, and finally Lorenzai's public office. Which turned out to be as empty of interest and value as that depressing series of waiting spaces. She thrust her head into a series of sewing rooms. They were all the same, bare and uninteresting. She wandered back into the halls, disappointed enough to feel a little depressed. She turned a corner.

The door to the anteroom before the maze was an uncurtained archway. She was in front of it before she realized where she was. She froze. But the mute slave was gone. The room was empty. After her heart slowed and her breathing steadied, she blew out the candle, ran on her toes across the small room, and entered the maze. Eyes closed, counting her steps, she let body memory help her thread through the complicated turns.

Light touched her eyelids. She jerked to a stop and opened her eyes. The exit to the maze was near, one more turn and she'd be out into the other anteroom. She listened. Not a sound. She strained against the wall, holding her breath, listening with all the intensity she could summon. Nothing. She edged past the corner.

The room was empty. On her right there was a shallow alcove. On the couch inside, the mute lay, eyes shut, breathing steadily, a thin blanket over his legs and torso.

Not daring to breathe she padded across the room and stepped into the corridor. Legs shaking, heart pounding, a pulsing pain in her temples, she leaned against the wall and let the air out of her lungs.

When she was calmer, she went soft-footed down the carpeted passage, trying doors as she came to them. One or two were locked. One seemed to be a library with stacks of scrolls resting on wide shelves. She poked about in there for a few minutes but little light trickled in from outside and she didn't dare relight her candle for fear of leaving tell-tale splotches of wax. She went out again and stood in the corridor looking at the turn close ahead. Amrezeh's bedroom lay around it. She rubbed at the scars on her face, then shivered and started forward.

Amrezeh's bedroom. The door was open a crack. A lamp was burning inside. She could see the glow. She dropped onto her stomach and edged the door open a little more. Holding her breath she pushed her head through the opening until she could see most of the room. It was empty. The bedding was turned back, the side door swung half-open showing a small sliver of another lighted room beyond it.

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Still on her stomach, she eased inside.

All senses straining, her stomach knotting and unknotting, she went rapidly and neatly through the jewel case. Leaving the more spectacular jewelry untouched, she slipped two from the small hoard of coins into her loot bag, then several heavy gold chains twisted together and pushed into the back of Amrezeh's jewel case.

The half-open door itched at her. She fidgeted from foot to foot, her eyes jerking back and forth between the two temptations. Leave now or go on? With a small gasp she danced on her toes to the wall and stood just beside the opening, listening intently. Nothing. She stroked her scars, sucked in a breath, then dropped to her stomach and worked her head slowly through the space between door and jamb.

Another bedroom, also empty. A simpler room, with massive furniture and somber colors like the robes Lorenzai wore. His room. *His kind of self-discipline,* she thought. *He does this more to rule himself than to fool others.* Letting the air trickle out of her lungs she went limp, lying on the carpet, chin propped on her fist, resisting an urge to giggle. *Layer on layer on layer. That man.* Breath puffed from her nose in tiny whuffs. She pulled her hands away and buried her face in the carpet to stifle her laughter.

When the fit passed, she sighed and snaked into the room. She pushed onto her feet and stood, hands on hips, inspecting it. Then she stiffened. Voices. Muffled. Coming from beyond heavy portiers. *Must open into a room there,* she thought. On her toes again, she ran to the drapes and listened. The voices were louder. Lorenzai and Amrezeh. Quarrelling or close to it. She edged the paired drapes apart and put her eye to the crack.

The room beyond was large with elaborately carved panels masking the stone of the walls. Big leather chairs scattered casually about. A rack of scrolls. In the center of the room, a table—a heavy slab of wood polished to a high gloss. On it, near one end, a circular metal tray holding a cha pot and two used cups. Thrown in a crumpled heap beside the tray, a soft leather pouch.

Lorenzai wasn't talking any more. He sat behind the table, bending over a small wooden box with the lid turned back. Whatever it contained was shining erratically, turning his face into a pattern of black lines and moving planes of light.

Amrezeh was stalking back and forth in front of him, scowling, her elaborate bedgown whuffling about her, her small bare feet kicking at the carpet's thick pile. She glared at him repeatedly, then stalked on, chewing at a knuckle, her eyes glittering, the blond hair

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flying out in wisps from her face. She wheeled suddenly and slapped her hands down on the table. "How much longer?" She threw her weight on quivering arms, every muscle tense. "How much longer are you and those cursed merchants of yours going to sit around talking? How much longer do I have to smile and smile and let those bitches treat me like . . . "

"Like the Ayandar's bastard daughter got on a concubine they despised." Lorenzai lifted angry eyes to meet hers. Then his face softened. "Rezeh, sit down. Let me work."

Behind the curtains, Gleia stifled an exclamation. *I've walked into something!* she thought. *The old man was right.*

Amrezeh thrust her hands into her hair and pulled, expelling her breath in an angry hoarse cry. Once again she slammed her hands on the table. "I want them dead," she hissed.

When he didn't answer, she flung out her arms. "Why the hell did I marry you?"

Lorenzai surged to his feet, his massive body knocking the table several inches forward. "Your loving father," he shouted at her. "He wanted his bastard daughter out of sight before she made scandals even he couldn't swallow."

She shrieked and leaped at him, fingernails striking at his eyes.

He shoved her hard away from him, but Gleia was astonished to see that he aimed her carefully at one of the large leather chairs.

Amrezeh bounced, then sat staring at him, trembling, tears flooding her eyes, slipping out one by one and sliding down her face. Her breast heaved. Her breathing rasped hoarsely in the new silence in the room. Lorenzai watched her sit up and rearrange her bedgown, his face somber. "Catch your breath, Rezeh. There's time. There's plenty of time." His brief burst of anger was already under control.

She let her head fall back. "Yes," she said tiredly. "Too much time."

Lorenzai resettled himself in his chair. He pulled the table toward him, the legs groaning loudly over the carpet. With a quick glance at Amrezeh, he thrust his hand into the box and pulled out a small egg-shaped crystal. He snapped it from hand to hand, called, "Rezeh! Look up. Careful with this." He tossed the crystal to her, smiled as she let it drop in her lap. "Get it to the Ayandar tomorrow. He's been after me for months to provide him with an Eye. Do it discreetly. Your neck on it and mine."

She nodded absently and stared down at the crystal in her lap. Behind the curtains Gleia could read a familiar fascination and revulsion in her face. Amrezeh touched it, jerked her hand away,

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touched it again, began stroking it. The veils of color shimmered about her, starting to coalesce into forms.

With an exclamation of horror, Lorenzai leaped across to her, knocking the table askew in his haste. He wrenched the Eye from her and dropped it on the carpet beside the chair. She tried to twist away, but he forced her back and held her against the leather until her struggles subsided.

She blinked and moved her lips. Then lifted her hands and passed them one after the other across her face. She was shaking. "Madar!" She shuddered. "Lorenzai . . . "

He lifted her from the chair and held her against him Carefully he swung around and sat down, still holding her. "Thought you knew better," he said softly. He began stroking his hand over her hair and back. Over and over until she stopped shaking. Then he slipped from under her and settled her back in the chair. With a last touch on her cheek he went to the table and perched a hip on it. "All right?"

She smiled. The smile widened to a yawn, then her eyes began to glitter again. "Dear daddy, he won't be able to put it down. How long before it eats him?"

Lorenazi shrugged. "You felt the power. Two-three days. Maddib and Chayl have arranged to send in some slave girls to the Apartas three days from now. They'll have more Eyes with them. Sadh-Mahar is working on the girls now to see that they do what we want, then forget everything. Once the Apartas have the Eyes, we move." With a quick loud snap he shut the lid on the box, then picked up the leather sack. "You wanted to know how long. Four days. Satisfied?" He tossed the pouch to Amrezeh. "Hang on to that a minute." Reaching behind him he scooped up the box and slid off the table. He crossed to a side wall and pressed the center of a salt-flower carved along the side of a panel, one flower in a cluster of five or six. A small square popped open, revealing a dark cavity. Lorenzai slid the box inside. After snapping the panel shut, he crossed to Amrezeh, took the sack from her and stuffed the Eye inside. He pulled the drawstring tight and held the sack out to her. "This is important, Rezeh. The Ayandar may be crazy, but he's not stupid. We've got to take him out before we can move."

"I can get it to him." She took the sack and set it down on the arm of the chair. "He hates all his daughters, wouldn't tell them he's breathing if they thought him dead. Suspects them all of trying to poison him, especially the Ayandara. Only reason he tolerates me is because he thinks I've got no way I could take him out." She

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giggled, stopped as the giggles grew shrill. "The fool!"

Lorenzai caught her flying hand and held it. "Won't be long now. Be patient, love."

With her free hand she touched his cheek. "Won't he be surprised. And he did it to himself when he married me to you instead of throwing me over the cliff. He thought of doing that. I don't know why he changed his mind." Her hand threaded through his hair in a gentle caress, then she ran the back of the hand down his face and touched it to his lips. "Dear daddy."

"You were lucky in your mother." As she flushed and tried to snatch her hand away, he closed his fingsrs hard. "Don't be a fool, Rezeh. Think a minute about your half-sister Lahalla who's Ayandara now because she poisoned her crazy mother. Would you want to be that half-mad bitch whose only sustained interest is running after adolescent boys?" He laughed and pushed onto his feet. Still laughing, he stretched his arms over his head, groaning as he worked stiff muscles. He brought them down and grinned at her. "Be glad you're what you are." He backed up and rested his buttocks on the edge of the table. "Back to business. Zuwayl is bringing in the last shipment tomorrow. He'll be here at low tide. Said he'd have the rest of the Eyes we need and the last load of arms. Four days and you can kick those half-sisters of yours off the cliff if you want." He smiled at her. "Satisfied?"

She yawned, brought her legs up and curled in the chair like a sleepy cat. "Yes. I want to see Lahalla bounce." She opened her eyes wide suddenly and was out of the chair, running to him. "No." She smoothed her hand down his body and leaned into him. "Come to bed."

Gleia jerked back, poised to run across the room and out. Then Lorenzai's words stopped her. "Down there," he said huskily. "Come down to the armory with me."

Gleia leaned to the slit. He was off the table, leading Amrezeh toward a wall. She looked a bit dubious for the first few steps, then her eyes glazed as the thought of making love amid spears and swords began to excite her. Gleia shivered. *He knows her damn well.* She shook her head, then put her eye back to the crack.

Amrezeh was dancing impatiently from foot to foot as Lorenzai pushed at the centers of three salt-flowers. A long narrow section of wall gaped open suddenly. Lorenzai wriggled through first and Amrezeh followed, clinging to his thick robe.

Gleia hesitated a minute, then brushed through the curtains. With a glance at the tantalizing gap in the wood, she circled the

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table and ran to the place where Lorenzai had stored the box. After a little fumbling about she managed to open the small cavity. She took out the box and turned back the lid.

Ranga Eyes. Her tongue flicked around her lips. Their lure tickled at her, calling her. She hugged the box against her breast, staring down at the nested crystals. Hesitantly she touched them with the fingertips of her free hand, waking in the Eyes the veils of color and in herself an urgent desire to know if the Eyes would bring her back to the world of beauty with stilt houses and butterfly people dancing in the air under a butter-yellow sun and daisies tall as trees. The crystals warmed under her fingers. She flattened her palm over them, then lifted one out. As it nestled in the curve of her palm she began to hear whispering voices, to see form within the veils.

"No!" She slammed her hand against the wall. The pain broke the spell. She dropped the Eye back in the box, hastily counted them, then slammed the lid shut. Fifteen Eyes. Fifteen souls sucked from their bodies. She pushed the box back into the cavity and clicked the panel shut. Rubbing at her hand, she crossed to the secret door. A little light penetrated from the lamps in the room and she could see the begininng of a spiral staircase. Curiosity pulled her down. She took a step past the panel, then she shook her head and backed out.

She moved into the center of the room. Turning slowly, she examined it, then shook her head again. *No,* she thought, *nothing from here. I'm not going to fool with that man. Ranga Eyes, Madar!* She giggled. *Ranga Eyes to power a coup!* Still laughing she ran out, heading for the maze.

Lighted candle in her hand, she slipped into her room. Humming a lilting tune, she slipped the bag from her shoulder and tossed it onto the bed, laughing at the dull chunk-chunk of the coins as they bounced. She carried the candle to the lamp on the sewing table, lifted the chimney and lit the wick.

And heard the chunk-chunk again of the gold coins. She wheeled. Shounach was sitting on the end of the bed emptying out the loot bag onto the cover. He looked up and grinned. "Busy little thing, aren't you."

"Fool. I near strangled on my heart."

He came off the bed and walked over to her, took hold of the slave ring, slipping his fingers in between the ring and her neck. "You're in a rut, girl."

She moved away from him and sat down in her sewing chair,

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leaned back, trying to look relaxed, watching as he sauntered about the room. He glanced briefly out the window then sat down on the bed again.

"Not me."

"What?" He lifted his legs onto the bed and stretched out, head resting on laced fingers.

"In a rut. Not me. Men. They seem to have only two ways for dealing with stray females. Rape them and slave them. Or both. Preferably both."

He glanced about the small cozy room. "You seem to have landed soft enough this time."

"Seen from the inside of this, it's not so soft." She tapped the slave ring with her thumbnail. "How'd you get in here?"

"Flapped my wings and flew through a window." His changeable eyes were bright green with amusement.

"Oddly enough, Juggler, I believe you. Why?" She caught the green glint again and hastily amended her question. "I thought you'd given up on me. Why bother coming here?"

"Why'd you leave Cern Vrestar so abruptly?"

"Tetaki told you."

"I wondered if you'd panicked and run from me."

"No!"

"Gleia, I know how it is with you."

Her hand came up and rubbed at the brand scars. "No," she repeated more steadily. "I didn't want to go. But I pay my debts."

"Companion," he said softly. His eyes, cooled to a silver grey, held hers.

She shifted uneasily. "I . . . " She couldn't finish.

"I thought that was a promise." The silver eyes were like ice.

She swallowed, then grew angry. "What did you expect! Jevati needed me. You . . . Juggler, when did you ever need anyone?" She pushed at her hair, then pressed the heels of her hands against her burning eyes. "Madar! Shounach, it's been a long hard day for me. What do you want here?"

"To get you out. If you want. Do you?"

She stared at him for several minutes. "No," she said, startling him and startling herself. "Not yet." Then she threw back her head and glared at him. "Do you think I can't get myself out whenever I want?"

"Still prickly." He relaxed, a smile touching the corners of his wide mouth. "My turn. Why?"

Gleia jumped to her feet and went quickly to the window, thrust-

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ing her shoulders in the embrasure. She stared blindly out, struggling to bring into order some of the things that revolved in her head. The plot, Shounach, the Ayandar and his crazy ideas, Amrezeh and Lorenzai, and most of all, the Ranga Eyes. Abruptly she jerked out again, filled with a new energy as things snapped into place for her. She dropped on the bed beside Shounach, one hand going out to rest on the hard muscles of his chest where the gaudy jacket fell open. "How long can you stay? I've got a story you might like to hear."

Gleia woke feeling obscurely happy. She moved slightly, thinking to feel Shounach's body against hers; but she was alone in a narrow bed grown suddenly too large.

He was standing by the window, the faint starlight silvering the planes of his face, painting heavy black lines from nose to mouth. He looked remote and sad, lost in the contemplation of some old pain.

"Shounach?"

He turned quickly and came to her. Bending down he drew fingertips gently along the side of her face. "Time I went, companion. The Cat's Eyes are high and Horli-rise is close."

She caught his hand and held it between hers. "Shounach, why do you want the Ranga Eyes?"

He straightened, pulling his hand free. "I don't."

"Why go after them, then?"

He was silent so long she thought he wasn't going to answer. At last he said quietly, "I'm hunting for the source."

"And?"

He looked down at hands closed into fists. "I'll destroy it, I'll wipe all those . . . " Wheeling, he crossed the room in two strides. Without stopping, he dived headfirst into the embrasure and disappeared.

Ignoring the chill of the air, Gleia scrambled from the bed and ran to the window. The fog had sunk to a woolly blanket over the water. By the time she located the Juggler's plummeting body, he was a dark blotch sinking into the haze. She stared and shook her head. "I don't believe it. I see it and I don't believe it."

She stood at the window until the clicking of her teeth grew too loud to ignore. In a scrambling dive she was under the covers, her knees drawn up against her breasts. It was a long time before she was warm and longer before she drifted back to sleep.

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The morning dragged. She worked on the cafta, trying to restrain her impatience. The front panels were finished. She began work on the strip around the bottom. The avrishum caressed her fingers and took the thread with a hunger that continued to amaze her.

About mid-morning she tucked the needle into the design, then sat stroking the material. "Stupid. I can't . . . "

With a shaky grin, she carried the cafta to the large mirror. She shook it out and held it up in front of her. Giggling at her foolishness, she stripped off her slave dress and pulled the avrishum over her head. She smoothed it down, shivering with delight at the touch of the material on her skin. When the hem was in, the cafta would be too short for her. So would the sleeves. But the allowance was so generous the sleeves came to mid-knuckle and the bottom brushed the floor. She stripped the rag from her hair and shook soft curls loose about her face. Then she held out her arms and examined her image in the mirror.

She caught her breath. She looked taller. There was a copper sheen in her dark brown hair. The glow of the avrishum was reflected in her eyes, changing the brown to hazel. Even the brand scars on her face took on an exotic charm. She stroked her hands over her breasts, down her sides to the curve of her thighs, delighting in the way the material took the touch and transferred it to the skin beneath. Almost as if some other hands were touching her. She turned slowly, twisting her neck to keep her eyes on the mirror, enjoying her fleeting touch of beauty.

Reluctantly she pulled the cafta off. After the avrishum, the coarse material of the black and white cafta felt doubly harsh on her skin. She settled back at the sewing table, moving her shoulders irritably before she took up the needle. *When I go, I'm taking this.* She measured the distance from the band of embroidery to the edge of the material. *I can widen these bands when I let down the hem.* She rubbed at her eyes and started work again.

At mid-afternoon Gleia heard a commotion in the hall and wondered briefly what was happening. Then she heard a flurry of tinkling laughter and slow-drawled words. A tall, thin blond woman came through the door. She was elegant and angular with an arrogance so total that lesser mortals simply accepted it as they would accept a force of nature. Behind her were coarser copies circling around her. Hastily Gleia rose to her feet.

The other women were tall and willowy with the same, almost-innocent pride of caste. The resemblance between them was strong.

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Amrezeh came in behind them and stood to one side, stiff and awkward. When her eyes flicked up, the hatred momentarily visible in her face was identification enough. *The Ayandara,* Gleia thought. *And the rest are Amrezeh's half-sisters and cousins.* She looked quickly from Amrezeh to the others and back. *A lifetime of scarring. Madar, I never thought I'd be glad my life was what it was.*

The Ayandara drifted over to her, followed by her fluttering court. The ice-blond tilted her head and examined Gleia's scarred face. "Ugly," she murmured. Shuddering with distaste she traced the brands with her fingernail. "Bonder from up north, isn't she." She stepped back. "But you said the merchant didn't buy her for her looks." With a ripple of laughter, hastily echoed by the others, she went on, "A lusty bull like Lorenzai might find a fascination even in this thing. You better watch her." The tip of her tongue travelled around her lips and there was a glazed look in the milky eyes. Then she slid those eyes to Amrezeh. Her thin lips stretched into a faint smile.

She's enjoying this, Gleia thought suddenly. *She knows exactly what she's doing to Amrezeh.*

"She's what? I forgot."

Amrezeh closed her eyes. After a major effort she subdued her rage and said softly, "She designs and embroiders, Ayandara."

"So. What's she working on now?"

"Hold up your work, girl. Show the Ayandara." Amrezeh was calm again, seemed resigned.

Gleia held the cafta so it fell in graceful folds from her hands, the front panels carefully displayed.

"Ay-ai!" The Ayandara abandoned her teasing and stared at the panels. She snatched the cafta away from Gleia and held the work closer to her short-sighted eyes. She fingered the stitching. "A treasure. Rezeh, give her to me." She dropped the cafta on the floor as she turned imperiously to her half-sister. Gleia quietly retrieved it. "I want her," the Ayandara repeated.

Gleia held her breath, the avrishum dripping from her hands. *Not now. I can't leave here now. Not before tonight.*

Amrezeh sank into a deep curtsey, her head almost touching her knee. "Though Despois Lorenzai bought her for me, I don't own her. Lorenzai is master of this house. I dare not give away anything of his without his consent."

Gleia began to relax, silently cheering Amrezeh on. In a tiny way the small blond was getting a touch of her own back. Anything the Ayandara asked for would get the same soft answer that said noth-

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ing except refusal but said it in such a way that the refusal was hard to counter even for the Ayandara's arrogance.

The thin blond was not accustomed to resistance to her desires. "We are displeased," she said icily. "We begin to think you don't want us to have this slave."

"I only have to ask," Amrezeh went on smoothly. "I'm sure he is as eager to honor the Ayandara as I. The girl will be sent to you tomorrow."

Her lower lip trembling with petulance, the Ayandara said, "We are seriously displeased." She swept toward the door, her women drifting after her. In the doorway she turned, the women parting hastily before her. She glared at Amrezeh, her eyes taking on a hard glitter foreign to her pose of elegant languor. "We will be more than displeased if that slave isn't in our hands by tomorrow morning." She sailed out, the women following, cautiously silent, though more than one of them darted contemptuous and rather startled glances at the stubborn little figure kneeling in the center of the sewing room.

When they were gone, Amrezeh rose stiffly to her feet. She took the cafta from Gleia and stroked her fingers over the stitching. "Continue," she said abruptly and went out.

Gleia was still working, sitting at the sewing table in her room, when Shounach slid in through the window. He dumped his bag on the floor and stood scowling at her. "You'll end up blind."

She folded up the avrishum, wrapped it in muslin and stuffed it into the loot bag, along with extra thread and needles and her scavenged gold. She smiled at him. "It helps steady me." She slipped the strap over her shoulder and smoothed the bag against her side. "I'd have gone crazy waiting for you with nothing to do. Had a little trouble this afternoon. The Ayandara covets me, nearly walked off with me. Would have, if Amrezeh hadn't stopped her." She shuddered. "Let's get out of here."

At the entrance to the maze she took his hand. "Madar grant they haven't changed the route," she whispered. Then she closed her eyes and began counting through the turns.

When they stepped into the corridor on the other side, Gleia went more boldly. Lorenzai would want no witnesses to his activities this night. Outside Amrezeh's bedroom, she dropped to her stomach and signed Shounach to lift the latch and ease the door open. When the room proved to be empty, she jumped to her feet and slipped in.

Grinning at her, Shounach sauntered through the door and

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started for the one leading to Lorenzai's room. Gleia caught hold of his sleeve. "Wait," she whispered.

"There's no one in that room."

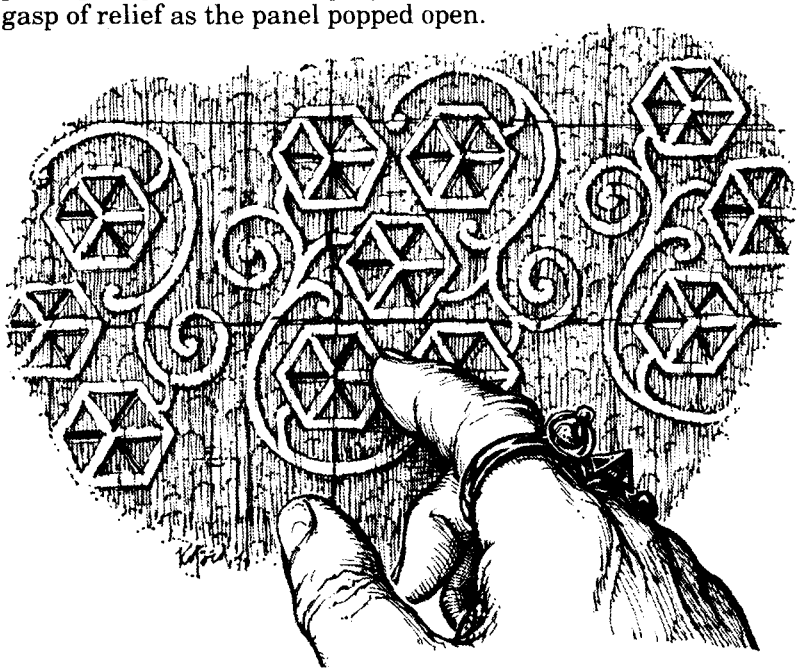
"How do you know?"

"No questions, companion." He frowned. "Why not get rid of this?" He touched the slave ring. "Stand still."

She heard the faint clicking of his probe, was intensely aware of his strong nervous hands brushing against her neck and shoulder. Then the lock clicked open. He broke the ring and pulled it away from her. As she rubbed at her neck, he dropped the ring to the floor and kicked it under Amrezeh's bed. She sighed with relief as it vanished, then looked up as his hands came down on her shoulders. He dropped a light kiss on her lips then turned her about and pushed her toward the other room. "Move."

When they stepped through the drapes into Lorenzai's study, he stopped by the table. "The Ranga Eyes. Where?"

Gleia crossed to the wall and stared at the carving. It was harder to remember the right spot than she'd expected. She fumbled exploring fingers over the sprays of salt-flowers, then gave a small gasp of relief as the panel popped open.



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Shounach reached a long arm over her shoulder and scooped out the box, startling her because she hadn't heard him come up behind her. He turned back the lid and stared down at the Ranga Eyes. "You said there were fifteen?"

She looked over his arm. "They're getting busy. Five gone." She shrugged. "Still ten of those things. Why don't you leave them there?"

"You know why." He snapped the box shut and slid it into his bag. "How do we get down?"

Sighing she moved along the wall and began hunting out the flowers that opened the hidden door.

"Need light?"

"Lorenzai didn't bother . . . ah!" The door swung open. She took a deep breath and stepped into the passage.

Six turns into increasing darkness. Then a sudden greying ahead. She hesitated, felt Shounach's reassuring hand on her shoulder. She touched it briefly, then edged around the turn. The stairs opened into a twisting hole that turned steeply downward. A knobby fungus growing in patches on the walls glowed with a cold greenish light. A deceptive light. She found herself stumbling uncertainly. It was hard to judge distance without shadows. Reaching out to the wall to steady herself, her fingers brushed against the fungus. It had a rubbery warm texture, almost like living flesh. She wiped her hands vigorously on her sleeves, then looked back over her shoulder. Shounach ducked down as he left the stairs, too tall to stand upright in this claustrophobic worm-hole. With a rueful smile he motioned her forward.

She nodded. Better to get out of this discomfort as soon as possible. She went on as fast as she could, wondering how Lorenzai managed his bulk in this cramped place.

As she negotiated the difficult dips and turns, her excitement rose until her heart nearly choked her. She was working free of this trap, using her wits and luck to outwit man and circumstance. She felt light-headed, soaring with elation. *Poor Lorenzai. Standing down there waiting for his ship to arrive.* She giggled. *Waiting for us though he doesn't know it and a bump on the head and being stowed away where Zuwayl can't see him while we take his place . . .* She giggled again then frowned. After several more turns of stumbling and swaying and knocking into walls, she became aware of a faint sweet odor. The fungus. She tottered along, wiping at her face with trembling hands, struggling to bring her mind and body back under control.

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The worm-hole wound down and down until a low sound began to merge with the near inaudible slip slip of her feet. The sound quickly grew louder until it was a rhythmic booming that bounced around the hole with deafening force. Then she was out of the blow hole, tottering on a narrow scratch carved from the side of a great echoing bubble in the stone whose top was lost in shadow and whose bottom was drowned in rocking black sea water. The fungus grew over the wall, thicker here because of the salt damp. The track, wide enough for two large men to walk side by side, had no guard wall. It angled steeply down to a short pier whose planks were sodden with the salt water, which was just backing off it as the tide fell. She walked to the edge and looked down. The black water washed against the black stone far below. *At least fifty meters,* she thought. Looking down so far with nothing for her hands to grasp made her dizzy. She retreated, bumping into Shounach as he came up behind her.

He chuckled and wrapped his arms around her. Lightly he edged her around and released her, then was off down the scratch ahead of her, his booted feet silent on the stone.

Gleia pressed the back of her hand against her mouth, biting down hard on her finger to stifle her annoyance. He was taking over her escape. She watched him flit down the track, an absurd figure in his crimson trousers and loose blue jacket flying open to expose its gold lining. With a reluctant smile she started after him.

As she moved more cautiously down, a spark of light angled along the rock some distance away. In the treacherous cold light of the fungus she saw a dark shadow, solid and large, carry the small flame along the pier toward the end, footsteps heavy and dull on the water-soaked planks. A torch flared. The candle flame moved to the other side of the pier and a second torch was burning.

Gleia blinked. The sudden brightness of the flame killed the feebler glow of the fungus and her dark-adaptation at the same time. The cavern was suddenly black except the small area of torchlight where Lorenzai stood, elbows out, square fists socked into his sides, staring out into the darkness. Gleia shut her eyes and waited a moment, trying to re-adapt. As she began creeping downward again, Shounach stepped onto the pier and started toward Lorenzai.

"Lorenzai!" The shriek burst into the silence, was echoed and re-echoed around the bubble. "Lorenzai renzai zai ai ai ai."

Gleia wheeled. Amrezeh was plunging recklessly down the track, her face twisted with fury. *She must have been up there all the time . . . followed us . . .* Gleia jerked back but Amrezeh was on her,

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biting and scratching, whining in her eagerness to hurt and punish. Her fingernails furrowed Gleia's cheeks. As the clawed hands drove for her eyes again, Gleia twisted away. She pulled her head down and slammed her fist into Amrezeh's diaphragm, driving her back, choking and gasping, stumbling, and finally falling hard on her buttocks.

Scrambling frantically, Amrezeh caught herself before her head cracked against the stone. Eyes glazed over, hands clawing, she was up immediately, driving at Gleia, knocking her back against the wall, mashing her against the patches of fungus, grinding the slimy stinking mess into Gleia's shoulders and hair.

Bleeding and nauseated, sick as much from the violence as from the stench, Gleia brought up one leg, planted a foot on Amrezeh's stomach and shoved blindly.

For a frozen moment Amrezeh tottered on the edge of the track. Her eyes opened wide. Her mouth gaped soundlessly. Then she fell back, tumbling over and over in eerie silence until just before she hit the water. A brief tearing shriek. A splash. Silence.

Dabbing at her face with her sleeve, her stomach churning, her hair clotted with the mashed fungus, Gleia staggered to the track's edge and looked down. The black water was lapping lazily at the stone, the surface rising and falling like the side of a panting beast. "No," she whispered. "No, I didn't mean . . . " She dropped to her knees and vomited until there was nothing left in her, until she knelt trembling with fatigue and soul-sickness.

"Gleia?" Shounach's shout and its echoes jerked her back to reality. She got shakily to her feet and looked down.

Shounach stood over a dark mound, his body tense. He relaxed a little when he saw her but called again to make sure. "Gleia?"

The word broke into fragments as it echoed around the bubble. She winced and tried to scrape some of the fungus off her hair. "It's me, Juggler." She scrubbed at her face with her sleeve then tugged at the cloth that was sticking to her back. Then she went slowly and unsteadily down the track. A few moments later she met Shounach on the pier.

"You stink, companion." He wrinkled his nose and backed away.

The look on his face surprised a short laugh out of her. "I know, Juggler. I'm closer to it than you." She squeezed sections of her hair between thumb and fingers, then flung the mess into the water beside the pier. "Is he dead?" She nodded at Lorenzai's body.

"No." He nudged Lorenzai with his toe. The body fell over to lie with arms and legs tumbled awkwardly. "Just out cold. He went

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berserk whem Amrezeh fell off the track."

Gleia dropped to her knees as her legs gave way with relief. The man's chest was rising and falling steadily; she could hear his rasping breath. *Not dead, thank the Madar he isn't dead too.*

Shounach sniffed. "As I remember it, you swim."

She looked up. "Yes, why?"

"Swimming seems a good idea right now." He grinned at her. "We've had enough melodrama, love." Grimacing with distaste, he picked her up before she could protest, strode the length of the pier, and dropped her off the end into the cold salt water.

Half an hour later, scrubbed pink, hair clean and damp, back in a soggy cafta, she stood beside Shounach over the bound and gagged figure of Lorenzai. She winced away from the fury in his eyes and turned to the Juggler. "Where are we going to put him?"

"I'm thinking about it." He began playing with the pouch of gold he'd taken from Lorenzai's robes, juggling it from hand to hand. From somewhere he produced the large and clumsy key to the armory's door and began tossing them both up and catching them, managing effortlessly the two radically different weights and shapes.

Gleia watched, exasperated. "Must you fool with those?"

One eyebrow arched up. "Why so serious, companion? Life is only as grim as you make it. Relax." He caught the pouch and the key and slipped both into his bag. "You take his feet. I'll get his shoulders. Up there." He pointed up the track to the point where the worm hole broke into the bubble. "No one's likely to look for him there."

After an exhausting struggle that Lorenzai hampered as much as he could, they dropped him on the stone and stood a moment to catch a breath before returning to the pier. Gleia leaned against Shounach smiling down at the merchant. "We'll see you get your weapons, Lorenai. I'm sorry about Amrezeh." She closed her eyes a moment, feeling sick as she saw again Amrezeh tottering on the rim of the track, face ugly with horror. "We didn't plan to hurt anyone; it just went wrong." Shaking herself out of her sudden depression, she moved away from Shounach. "We'll have your smuggler stack the weapons in front of your armory. You can still pull your coup. Not my business but I think you'll do a lot better at running Thrakesh than those crazy Ayandari." She smiled tentatively but the rage on the merchant's face failed to abate. He humped his body about, struggling against his bonds, then fell back gasping for breath around the gag.

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Shounach tossed the armory key down beside him. It rang on the stone, bounced, settled against Lorenzai's arm. "Forget him." He took Gleia's arm. "You're not going to reach him now. Come on. Time's passing."

An hour later they stood together between the torches, watching a line of small boats come into the light. Gleia plucked at the still damp material of her cafta and glanced up at Shounach. He was frowning slightly, his eyes moving from the six rowers to the man sitting at the bow of the front boat. She tugged at his sleeve. "Zuwayl?"

"Probably."

"You know him?"

"No."

She looked back at the nearing boats. "Five of them, Shounach. A lot of men."

"We don't intend to fight them. Words, Gleia. They'll get us a lot farther than swords."

Gleia examined the man they thought might be Zuwayl. "Wag your tongue carefully, Juggler."

Zuwayl stepped from the boat onto the pier. He looked at them, looked past them at the empty pier, raised his eyebrows and turned to face Shounach. "Who're you?"

"Passengers."

"Hah! Not that I know. Persuade me."

Shounach tossed five pentoboloi at him, one at a time. "Let these whisper in your ear."

Zuwayl grinned and clicked the coins in his left hand. "They have sweet tongues, friend. Welcome aboard." He jerked a thumb at the boats rocking in the water by the end of the pier. "I had a deal."

"Still got it. Our friend who shall be nameless gave me the money for the shipment. Have your men haul it up and dump it in front of the armory door."

Zuwayl's mouth split in a wide grin, folding the skin of his cheeks into a dozen small wrinkles on each side of his mouth. His eyes disappeared into a nest of wrinkles. "You seem like an honest man, friend." He snapped thumb and forefinger together. "Me, I gotta check myself to see I don't sell my skin. The gold, friend."

Shounach dipped into his bag and produced the pouch of gold. He tossed it to Zuwayl.

"Now that's style." Zuwayl wheeled, casually turning his back on

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them. "Jorken, take our passengers out to the ship. Heller, the rest of you, start unloading. Move it. Tide'll be in before we finish, we don't hurry."

Gleia stepped into the boat and settled herself somewhat nervously between two of the villainous looking oarsmen. Shounach stopped for a last murmured word with Zuwayl, then settled in behind her.

The stone bubble's wall swept quickly down to another worm-hole dripping seaweed and slime. They wound quickly through the short tunnel, then were out under the open sky and heading for a dark bulk barely visible in the dusting of surface mist. Gleia looked curiously around.

They were outside the breakwater in the open sea. She glanced up and back, catching fugitive gleams from the gilded roofs of Thrakesh. She moved her shoulders impatiently. That part of her life was irrevocably over. *Over.* She laughed silently, remembering the crazy rage in Lorenzai's eyes. *Better to get away far and fast.* She looked around at the men bending their backs in practiced unison as they drove the boat across the waves toward the ship anchored in deeper water. *Far and fast. The both of us.*

She started to look back at the Juggler but changed her mind. *Time for that later. Time to find out who and what he is. Shounach the juggler. The thissik Keeper called him Starfox. Hunting for the source of the Ranga Eyes. Should be uncomfortable but interesting.* As the long boat's bow cut across the incoming waves, rising and falling in bumpy swoops, she began to feel a similar swooping in her spirits.

She ran her hands through her hair and sniffed the wind. Southwind again. *Southwind.* She laughed aloud, drawing astonished glances from the rowing men. *Southwind my mother, here I go again. Jumping into the dark. I wonder what will happen this time.*

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LETTERS

Dear Mr. Scithers:

I would like to congratulate you on the success of *IA'sfm* (please forgive the abbreviation, my hand tires easily). I have thoroughly enjoyed reading your last nine issues. However, were it not for my insatiable appetite for science fiction, I might never have read my first issue. I realize that the present cover is intended to enhance circulation. Obviously, I have no objections to increased circulation of *IA'sfm,* but I would like to see a work of art on the cover comparable to the literary art found within. Barring this, an illustration which agrees with the description in the story (something I have yet to see) would be nice.

I feel that the most outstanding feature of your magazine is the large number of high-quality stories (due to high editorial standards, I assume) by fresh, new writers (not to mention a sprinkling of the old masters—the use of "old" refers to experience rather than age). I must also compliment your decision not to present stories in serial form, as this can destroy the enjoyment of a good story. Please keep up the good work.

Sincerely,

Craig Sandford
Highland Park IL

Quality in art, as in literature, is, to a certain extent, a subjective decision. Our artists, like our writers, do their best.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers, Isaac, Ms. McCarthy and Mr. Davis,

Enclosed is a manuscript and an envelope with return postage. I don't know whether this story was outdated years ago or not, but I'll gamble.

Your magazine is cheap and has the best short stories I have ever read. Particular goodies are "The Adventure of the Solitary Engineer," "Shawna, Ltd.," "Enemy Mine," "The Backwards Look." These are *not* listed in order of preference.

Incidentally, I cannot imagine the Good Doctor's hormones being excited by scantily dressed women. (I can't even imagine him *having* hormones.)

Do something about labels, please quit discouraging sharing, and

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get in as many Barry B. Longyear stories as you can.

Yours,

Bob Carrico
A Hopeful Writer
Mayfield KY

Oh, I have hormones, but they're well-hidden. No one can find them except women.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers:

Please send me your description of story needs and discussion of manuscript format. [*Done.*] I don't have any experience in writing fiction, and none in any kind of writing for sale. You may never receive anything from me in the way of submissions, but your magazine seems to be one of the only places for aspiring authors to receive a chance if not an open welcome. Actually, I see from reading your magazine (and I don't think I've missed an issue, yet) that a number of new authors have seen print through you. The best way to support this is to keep buying, so please find enclosed my subscription order.

My hat is off to Dr. Asimov. I've been reading his books and stories and articles for the last 20 years and find a man who can keep so many plates spinning at once awe inspiring. I partly owe my career in computers (as a senior programmer) to *I, Robot.* That series of stories really taught me that technology is a *human* activity unless you *hide* behind the machines.

One aspect of writing was pointed out by an editorial by Dr. Asimov. At least after a frantic search through my back issues that didn't produce the editorial, I think the good Dr. decried the fact that modern writers don't seem to use technology (computers) to help them through the "grunt" work of writing. By this, I mean the rewrite and revision side. As a computer type, I have access to the power of the computer to help me edit text. Can you accept manuscripts printed on standard computer equipment?

I look forward to many years of enjoying your magazine, and please give Dr. Asimov my best wishes for good (and better) health. There are a great many of us out here who never write in who would feel an era had passed if we didn't hear from the Dr. two or three times a month, whether we agree 100% with what we read or not.

Jim Wagner
Durham NC

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Sorry, but I wrote no such editorial. I'm ashamed to say I use no computer help. Too set in my ways.

—Isaac Asimov

While we can use stories that have been typed on a computer output printer, there are some restrictions. First, you will have to use a system that prints both capital and lower-case letters; we cannot use manuscripts typed in all capital letters. Second, the typing must be reasonably easy to read: no worn-out ribbons, worn-out type, or dot-matrix printers which produce the letters "s," "e," and "g" that look almost exactly alike. And third, please do NOT use a program that produces a justified right margin, for this makes it difficult to determine the word count.

(The way we count words—or more accurately, "words"—is as follows: count the number of letters and spaces and punctuation marks in an average, mid-paragraph line. Divide by six. Multiply that by the number of lines per page. Multiply that product by the number of pages, correcting for pages that are partly blank. We do NOT correct for short lines, as in dialog; they are counted as if they are full-length lines.)

—George H. Scithers

Dear Mr. Scithers,

I have been a reader of *IA'sfm* since the first issue. I have been a subscriber since the third issue. I must say (both as an expression of my true feelings and as is apparently required of anyone writing to you) that I find your magazine to be the best of its kind to be found today. As proof of that statement, I offer this: I have been avidly reading science fiction for nearly thirty years and yours is the first magazine I've felt the need to subscribe to so as to be sure of not missing an issue. Congratulations on your excellent work. However, I do have one complaint. Lately, *IA'sfm* has been appearing on the newsstands up to two weeks before I receive my copy through the mails. Admittedly, the US Postal Service leaves something to be desired in the area of efficiency but, since this never happened before, I am led to suspect that the fault lies with your organization and not that oft-maligned branch of the government. I would greatly appreciate being told why subscribers must wait several weeks longer than casual magazine buyers to enjoy *IA'sfm*. I am sure that others would also like to know.

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Finally, please send me a copy of your manuscript requirements and story needs. [*Done!*] I've never written anything for consumption outside my family and small circle of friends but I may give it a try one of these days and it would be an honor, indeed, to receive my first rejection slip from such an excellent publication. Thank you.

Yours truly,

Bruce M. Kaspar
8830 Keystone Dr.
Omaha NE

Alas, there was a fire that burned up many copies of the magazine. We had to reprint them, and thus they were mailed late. Act-of-whatever!
—Isaac Asimov

Dear George:

It i certainly gratifying to ee that IA'fm ubcribe to the practice of hiring the handicapped. You have apparently acquired a typeetter who i miing the ring finger of the left hand—that being the only logical explanation I can come up with to account for the conpicuou abence of a certain letter in much of the November iue.

I once had a typewriter which abolutely refued to print that particular letter, and I olved the problem by telling people I typed with a lithp. While thith underthtandably led to a certain amount of confuthion, it wath probably preferable to ignoring the miththing conthonant altogether.

Typographical mayhem aside, I really enjoy the magazine, particularly the humorous stories like Sharon Farber's "From the Lunatech Admissions Committee." Since the ability to poke a little fun at oneself is an attribute of maturity, the appearance of such stories in print is an encouraging sign indeed.

Thanks for a continuing source of enjoyable reading.

Sincerely,

Lynda Carraher
Umatilla OR

We had problems with a recalcitrant typesetting computer that month. I sincerely hope we've solved them.
—Shawna McCarthy

I don't think it's kind of you to make fun of a handicapped computer.
—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Dr. Asimov and Mr. Scithers:

I discovered your magazine several months ago and have been hooked ever since. I am particularly pleased with the number of first sales and the fact that the magazine has an honest-to-deity-of-your-choice sense of humor! Never have I had so many chuckles, guffaws, and groans.

Now, if only I had a little extra money I could afford to get every issue . . . the fact that you have published so many new authors gives me an idea. Ah, could you please send me your story needs and format?

Keep up the great work, but then with the Good Doctor on the team how can you do otherwise?

Sincerely,

Jim Tesch
Conway AR

Why extra *money? Skipping a meal once a month will probably improve your health.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr.:

In answer to the letter appearing in the November issue by W. David Todd concerning your "flashy covers," *please don't change.*

I suspect that you may have given in to nostalgic feelings dating back to your younger years with *Astounding* and other such venerable publications.

I enjoy the covers very much, being a fan of spaceships, BEM's, and the like and sincerely ask you not to even consider changing the format of your covers.

Sincerely,

Steven Julian
Bloomington IN

These controversies are the breath of life. How dull it would be to have universal success and contentment! Right, Joel?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. A.:

Re your Editorial on "The Dean of Science Fiction"

I think no one can argue with your reasoning nor really with your conclusions, although there must surely be some who would not

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agree that Heinlein is the best! I know some who would give you the title, and each of the four you name as the elders must have his champions—to say nothing of the fans of Anderson, Le Guin, Ellison, Silverberg, or whoever. Personally, I would have great difficulty making a choice among all of these and half a dozen others I could name with very little reflection.

On the subject of elders, where do we fit Fred Pohl, who has been around almost as long as you and Heinlein and still appears currently in your mag.

I do like your idea of del Rey for Grand Master. So many great stories over the years—including "Helen O'Loy" which ranks among the top ten in my memory—to say nothing of the editing, book reviewing, and other literary activity. . . . A noble choice, which I hope your fellows in SFWA will take up and then follow closely with a richly deserved similar award to the most prolific if not the longest-lived or best writer in the field—for your science fact articles as well as your fiction. SFWA might logically feel that articles don't count, but to those of us who have subscribed to *F&SF* over the years, they do.

Being very nearly your age—that is, a little over 30—I occasionally saw SF mags in the thirties, but since my father and grandfather didn't buy them, I had no opportunity to read. They bought *Blue Book, Short Story, Argosy,* and *Adventure,* all of which I am sure your father stocked in the candy store. I read those and later an occasional mystery through my college years, by which time the old pulps had died. Then for some time my reading was confined to *Atlantic, Harpers, The Saturday Review,* and once in a while *Ellery Queen.* Fortunately, my son, when he reached adolescence, discovered all those marvelous writers referred to in your editorial and introduced me to them and to *Analog, F&SF, Galaxy, If,* and finally your mags. Does second adolescence precede second childhood? Or am I correct in my feeling that even juveniles written by a Heinlein are to be preferred over much of what the mainline critics are touting these days (not to imply that *Atlantic* does not still publish some excellent short stories or that Michener does not write a great saga).

Thank you again for the fine mag, the interesting editorials, and one of the best letters sections anywhere.

Regards,

James Stanford Mead
Portland OR

Unfortunately, being ever-young, I may never impress the powers-

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that-be with my own solid worth. "That young squirt?" they will say, and give it to some really old guy like Fred Pohl.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers:

Thank goodness I splurged this summer! On my wife's birthday (which is my six-month birthday) I bought myself a two-year subscription to *IA'sfm*. Knowing that it is coming every month is a relief and the anticipation is something else! Aside from the constant enjoyment, having my subscription has done *at least* two other things.

First: it has cut down my book bills. I used to buy the magazine in a local book store. Rarely did I leave without tucking a paperback under my arm. (I did pay for them!) It started getting expensive. But now all that's changed.

Second: Baird Searles' reviews are making me more discriminating as well as opening up new vistas of material I have yet to experience. Were there nothing else to say, I would say my subscription has paid for itself. That's THANK YOU ONE!

I'm not much on science but the articles and comments are terrific. With a little extra research and conversation of late I am learning about things I never thought I'd understand. THANK YOU TWO!

Even though I haven't hit the combination yet, I'm still writing and trying. Your rejections are the best because they *teach!* The impersonal note makes *me* feel rejected. Your comments make me realize I did not write a good story. There's a big difference. THANK YOU THREE!

Now, last and most, thanks for the stories, especially these from September, October, and November. They were incredible and left me with feelings that are hard to explain. If I had addresses, the authors would get a letter about each story and what it did to me. I hope they might see this to know the hours of gifts they have given me. THANK YOU FOUR for "Solo"—"Enemy Mine" —"Mandalay"—"The Raindrop's Role"—"Furlough"—"Gift of a Useless Man."

To you and the good doctor, to your obviously excellent editorial and production staff I say THANK YOU! The next two years are going to be terrific! Count on me now for a definite renewal!

Mind if I say it again?

THANKS!

Jim Drury
1113 North "G"
Lompoc CA 93436

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And about my editorials you say nothing?

—Isaac Asimov

Dr. Asimov et al:

Recently, you replied to an unsuspecting reader with the implication that you (Dr. A.) are "only human." I find that statement absolutely ludicrous.

My theory is that you, George Scithers (a phony name if I ever heard one), and the whole staff of *IA'sfm* are actually extraterrestrials in semi-human form. You are, without a doubt, the vanguard of a future invasion. The first step of this program is an attempt to dull the senses and corrupt clear-thinking individuals like myself. You are doing this by continual suggestions that this magazine has some redeeming value. I have, however, caught on to your scheme of conquest and am collecting these publications as evidence of your alien natures.

I give you fair warning!!! I intend to infiltrate and expose you. I intend to gain your confidence by submitting, in the near future, a manuscript. (It will closely adhere to your silly requirements.) I will sneakily use my own name to further throw you off guard. Full realizing that you are incapable of recognizing my geniousity, I expect that you will probably find some excuse to reject my first efforts.

Be all the above as is, I suggest that you be wary!!! To prove my dedication to this project, I have recently extended my subscription!!! I will Persevere!!! You will be caught!!!

Robert J. Stawicki
(Alien Investigator Extraordinary)
Trenton NJ

P.S. You probably won't print this for fear of exposure.

Well, I have a Mercurial temperament, and George is widely reputed to be Jovial. As for Shawna, where else but Venus?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers,

The new issue—November 1979 (whole number 21)—has been in my hands for over a week and I'm still finding something novel (?) with every re-reading. It started out as usual; the Di Fate cover, Dr. Asimov's editorial, and Mr. Searles' section were all fine—then

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something *unusual* happened. Both Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.'s "The Raindrop's Role" and Alan Dean Foster's "Gift of a Useless Man" topped (in my opinion) Barry B. Longyear's "Twist Ending"!

Here is how I rated the stories in issue 21: "The Raindrop's Role" and "Gift of a Useless Man" tied for first place; "Twist Ending" placed second; "The Fare" by Sherri Roth and "Flamegame" by Steve Perry tied for the third spot; "Furlough" by Skip Wall came in fourth; the other nine stories were pretty good, but the above six hit home the hardest.

Now, one more thing before I stop—as far as *IA'sfm* appears locally, *it doesn't!* I *don't* know how magazine distributing is supposed to work, but I *do* know that *IA'sfm* is not in the racks at the local stores. How do I get the stores to carry *IA'sfm* and *AsfAm*?

Joseph E. May, Jr.
Sanford FL

We're looking into the problem. Many, many thanks for telling us about it.

—George H. Scithers

Gentlemen:

I've only been a subscriber for 6 months. It is the only magazine I get because I don't have time to read any (being a student keeps me pretty busy beating my head against the wall). As a whole I find *IA'sfm* to be a great excuse to go from my world of science studies into the beautiful world of science dreams.

I do have a complaint though. I realize that every magazine has its good months and its bad, but to follow one of your best (Nov. 79) with your absolute worst (Dec. 79) is more than I can handle. And to make matters worse, somehow your circulation got messed up because I received them within a week of each other.

Your November issue was excellent (not a story I didn't like), with thought-provoking stories like "The Raindrop's Role" and "Flamegame," and I really enjoyed "Twist Ending." So with the fine memory of those good stories I jumped right into the December issue (Faraday, Gauss, and Ampere would still be around when I surfaced) only to be let down. I would have preferred to see the entire story "Like unto the Locust" replace the lesser stories in that issue. I don't like "to be continued's."

Now I'll admit my brain cells tend to be denser than the norm. But I cannot believe that there were only two stories that I could

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follow ("Ferdinand Feghoot V" and "Like unto the Locust").

Oh, by the way, when I read "The Cool War" I didn't realize it was a sequel. How can I get the first one? ("Mars Masked" was it?) I'm not really wild about coming into the middle of a sequence.

In summary, please have more issues with the November quality. I'll be looking forward to them.

Sharon Barman
Lafayette IN

We've rather been caught in a cleft stick on the matter of serials. Perhaps I had better write an editorial on the matter.

—Isaac Asimov

"Mars Masked" appeared in the March 1979 issue.

—Shawna McCarthy

Dear Dr. Asimov and Barry Longyear,

I am sixteen years old and a sophomore at Duke University. I have been reading science fiction for about six years now and have read approximately 900 science fiction novels and anthologies. Rarely, however, have I encountered a magazine as good as *IA'sfm* or short stories as good as those of Barry Longyear's. I will be forever indebted to you, Good Doctor, for introducing me to the high quality of fiction by this man, and to you, Mr. Longyear, for the hours of entertaining reading and the further hours of contemplation that your stories have provided me. As this is my first letter to *any* magazine, I will keep it short so as not to further endanger any hopes that I might have had of seeing my name in print.

Gratefully Yours,

Mitchell A. Garber
P.O. Box 4493, Duke Station
Duke University
Durham NC

How glad I am there isn't a jealous bone in my lovable body. Otherwise I might feel sad at people being indebted to me for someone else's stories.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers,

Just back from Virginia, Thanksgiving with friends, and among

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the accumulated mail, the inevitable rejection slip and the December *IA'sfm*, which coincidentally has an editorial on rejections. Dr. Asimov runs the gamut of all the rationalizations behind the necessity of rejections; the writer's outrage, his resentment, and the cauterizing pain, yet he seems to omit what is perhaps the most important function of the editor.

It seems to me that the editor, in rejecting some story, might be protecting the embryo author from his own inept efforts. It is actually a kindness to spare the author the embarrassment of seeing his worst efforts in print. It would certainly detract from whatever reputation he might achieve with his better efforts.

In this respect, Dr. Asimov verges into evasiveness. He mentions his own rejections, but does not add that he has used the leverage of his reputation to override the veto of editors where his own poor efforts were concerned, and has inflicted upon the public such collections of rejects as *The Early Asimov* and that puerile horror labelled *Buy Jupiter*.

It would be less distressing to the frustrated author, and he might be more resigned to the editorial fiat if he were spared this hypocrisy.

Sincerely,

Milton Rosen

Sorry, kid, all those stories in The Early Asimov *and* Buy Jupiter *were acceptances. If you think I ever overrode an editorial veto, you don't know editors.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers,

I only criticise because I care. *IA'sfm* (I call it *Ike's*) very quickly rose to become one of the "top three" SF magazines, in my opinion. All three are "number one."

But.

Rothman's "The Eternal Genesis" (Nov. 79) was one of the worst pieces I have read in a while. It seemed to be a thinly disguised parable on How To Write Stories With Happy Endings. What Rothman needed was a story . . . not several story-fragments which would never have made it past the slush-pile on their own, framed in pressed-wood. And speaking of cardboard, the piece also needed some characters I could care about, and some accurate characterization. Jim Kincaid was not twenty years old. Jim Kincaid was more like sixteen. And Jim Kincaid was a bore. So was May. So was Tina.

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I know Rothman can do better.

The other stories in the issue ran from okay to excellent. "Twist Ending" (Longyear) was okay. Slightly amusing, but I've heard it before. "The Raindrop's Role" (O'Donnell) was very good. It spoke truth to me. It spoke of loneliness and loyalty. It brought our own humanity into sharp focus in contrast with the alien "humanity" of the students. The ending was a statement to which I could answer only, "Why not? How fitting."

"In Spring a Livelier Iris" (Berman) was good. Its idea was very interesting and it played the same games with our humanity and our ideals as O'Donnell's story. The reduction to absurdity of man's view of death was marvelous. "From the Lunatech Admissions Committee" (Farber) was fun.

"Furlough" (Wall) was excellent. The characters were real, the tension tangible. I really *wanted* the Sandersons to accept Dawson. "Flamegame" (Perry) was excellent. I was floating with Teela, feeling with Teela. My heart was racing with hers. And I figured out the solution only a short time before Teela did.

"The Fare" (Roth) was very good. I enjoyed the friendship between young and old. I enjoyed the new twist to the old idea. And although he did it for what he thought was her own good, I hope Seth doesn't feel too guilty for "murdering" what was truly the oldest person alive in that world. "Autumn Sunshine . . ." (Morressy) was amusing.

"The Sapphire . . ." (Ford) was good. It made me look up and wonder. . . . "Sharing Time in the Gallery" (Webb) was excellent. Webb understood her aliens and helped me to understand her aliens. And (perhaps) for a while, I was *thinking* as her aliens.

"On the Midwatch" (Minnion) was okay. There was too much jargon and the ending was unsatisfying. "Mountain Wings" (Van Scyoc) was very good. The picture of faith it drew was true. Yes, that is the way a person feels, acts, believes. "Gift of a Useless Man" (Foster) was also very good. It's nice to know the "useless" can play a role, too.

Your fillers are generally enjoyable, too. There isn't much of a market for poetry—I'm glad to see you making one. I really enjoy the blurbs about each author in the style of the old *F&SF*. I wouldn't mind them longer (you could double the size without taking up any more lines by doubling the width). The blurbs make your magazine even more personal than it would be anyway.

One last suggestion: although I cherish every word the Good Doctor writes, and I chuckle over all of his anecdotes, I realize that this

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is really George Scithers' magazine (in all but name). How about an editorial from the real editor once in a while?

Sincerely,

Abigail F. Strichartz
Ithaca NY

Nobody can call it Ike's *and remain unstruck by lightning. Call it* Isaac's, *if you must. As for George, he's writing a book on how to write that will be worth sextillions of editorials.*

—Isaac Asimov

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—Shawna McCarthy

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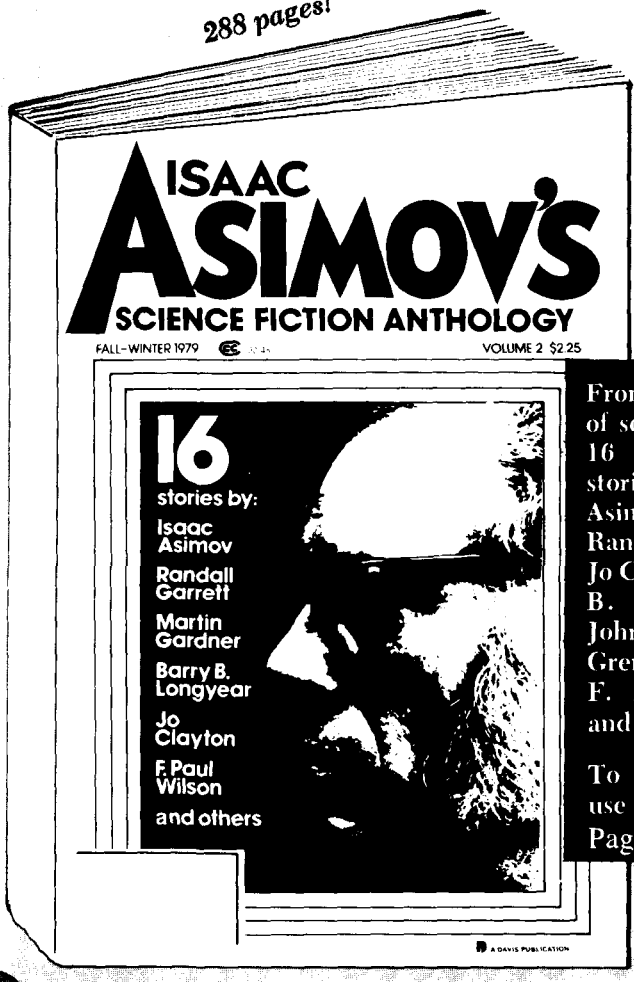

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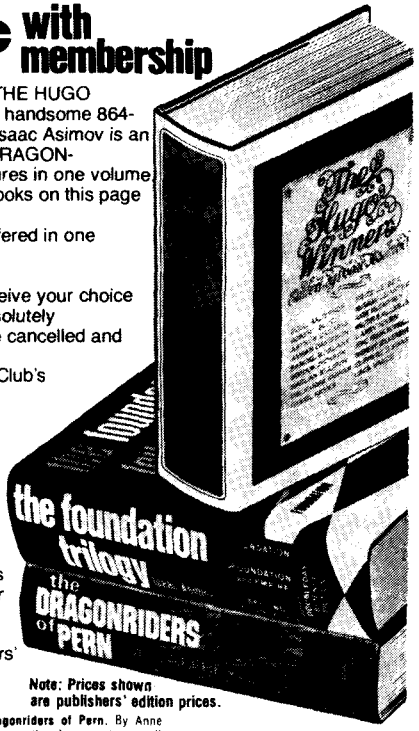

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